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**Caste**  
**&**  
**untouchability**

Pro Manuscripto

Title: Caste & untouchability. A study-research paper in the Indian Subcontinent

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A few years ago, my confreres (Xaverian Missionaries working in Bangladesh) requested that I conduct a four-day course on caste and untouchability. Probably, I benefited as much from teaching the course as my student-confreres did since the process helped me crystallize my ideas about Hinduism and the ramifications of certain aspects of this religion upon the cultures of the subcontinent.

From time to time, I am invited to different places to deliver lectures on these two topics. I usually accept these invitations because I am convinced that those who would like to do something to change the miserable lot of so many poor people living in the Indian Subcontinent must be knowledgeable about the caste system and untouchability.

People need to be aware of the negative effect and the impact of these two social evils regarding the abject misery and poverty of those who are at the bottom of the greater society.

It seems that people living in the Indian Subcontinent, no matter which religion they belong to, are still affected (consciously or unconsciously) by these aspects of Hinduism that have seeped into other religions as well.

In order to prepare myself for the task of lecturing (on caste and untouchability), I read and studied many books, magazines and articles on these two evil institutions of Hinduism, which have affected the social life of most of the people living in the Indian Subcontinent. Through these studies and through the experiences gained from living twenty-five years in Bangladesh, I have been able to acquire some knowledge about caste and untouchability which I wish to share.

There are many publications (some out of print) on caste and untouchability but it would be quite difficult for ordinary readers to find and sift through them. For this reason, some of my confreres repeatedly requested that I put together all my notes on these two topics and at the same time to signal the most important books and publications which deal with these two aspects of life on the Indian subcontinent.

In addition to my confreres, a good number of NGO people who know that I have acquired an awareness about caste and untouchability have expressed the same request again and again. Because of decades of work at the grass roots level with the Bangladeshi untouchables (*Rishi*), I have gained an in-depth knowledge of the caste system through experience, study, and interaction with the people.

Since I perceive a genuine desire on the part of others to learn more about the caste system, I would like to address this desire by formalizing my notes. After much thinking, I have decided to apply myself to this time consuming task. Time needed for this work will not be wasted and labor will be rewarded if this study-research can be of any help, at least to those who have asked for it.

In order to write this study-research in English, the help and co-operation of a special person, the Community Liaison Office Coordinator of the U.S. Embas-

sy/Dhaka: Ms. Jo Ellen Fuller was needed. This work has been a unique joint venture between an Italian, Catholic Missionary and an American, Protestant layperson. Without Jo Ellen's prodding, all my notes on caste and untouchability would have remained in the drawer of my desk and cockroaches would have eaten them up.

Ms. Fuller spent hours revising drafts and editing chapters which shows her deep interest in this research.

Moreover she developed a strong interest for the out caste Rishi people and has helped the Xaverian Missionaries working among these Rishis living in the villages around the Catholic Mission of Chuknagar, Dumuria, and Khulna in Bangladesh.

In 1999, Jo Ellen was honored when she was chosen with five others around the world to receive the Secretary of State Award for Outstanding Volunteerism abroad. She was given this award by Madeleine Albright, the US Secretary of State, on May 5, 2000. Along with the US Ambassador to Bangladesh, the Xaverian Missionaries and the Rishi people also think that Ms Jo Ellen Fuller deserved the award in recognition of her extraordinary volunteer service overseas which demonstrate the difference one person can make in the lives of others. Both the Xaverian Missionaries working in Chuknagar Catholic Mission and the Rishi people will be grateful to this person forever.

Thoughts and ideas expressed in this study - research may not fully be agreed upon by the readers. The author welcomes any kind of questions, criticism, suggestions, or additions.

Fr. Luigi Paggi s.x

# CHAPTER 1

## CAUSES AND ROOTS OF POVERTY

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Scholars tend to explain poverty and unequal distribution of wealth mainly through economic theories. To exclude other factors such as religion, culture, mental attitudes, etc. is a rather narrow and antiquated approach to analyzing humanity's situation of "haves" and "have nots." Clearly, it seems there are strong hindrances towards human development and progress, which come directly from the cultural milieu of a nation and a race. Those with some knowledge of the Indian subcontinent cultural environment will agree that the roots of poverty and misery of the subcontinent must be found to a great extent in the Indian soil rather than totally in the European colonization. This chapter will deal with worldwide reasons for poverty and then focus on factors unique to the Indian subcontinent in regard to causes of poverty.

Until recently, nations were divided into three categories: 1<sup>st</sup> world, 2<sup>nd</sup> world, and 3<sup>rd</sup> world. The democratically developed countries represented the 1<sup>st</sup> world. The 2<sup>nd</sup> world was made up of countries following the ideals of Socialism. The 3<sup>rd</sup> world was formed by all those so-called "developing countries." When the 2<sup>nd</sup> world collapsed, the Brandt Commission divided nations into two groups: North and South.

Most of the developed countries are situated in the North and most of the developing countries can be found in the South. 80% of the total population of the world lives in the South and only 20% lives in the North. This means that in countries of the North, such as in Italy or the United States, one can drive for miles without meeting a single human being. However, in countries of the South, such as Bangladesh (one of the most densely populated countries in the world), wherever a foreigner stops hundreds and hundreds of people immediately surround him or her. The few people living in the North consume 80% of the wealth of this world and the masses of people living in the South have to survive on the 20% of the remaining material resources of the earth.

So, there is clearly an uneven distribution of wealth, resources, and population between the countries of the North and of the South, which causes abject poverty and misery among the masses of the developing countries. Collectively, the countries of the North must admit to our role of perpetuating this division. One must ask, to what purpose is the North continuing to bleed the countries of the South?

A look at our Judeo-Christian background might shed some light on the situation as a large number of countries in the North are populated with people of this religious heritage. We have not been able to overcome the three basic temptations faced by Christ and every human being who comes into this world. The temptations or three famous "Ps" are: possessions of things; pleasure; power.

It seems that possessions, pleasure, and power drive nations to dominate others at a great sacrifice on the part of the lesser-developed nations.

In the desert, Christ was able to overcome these three Ps. (Mt 4:1-11). St. John, in his first letter, warned us very clearly about these three evils: *“Stop loving this evil world and all that it offers you, for when you love these things you show that you do not really love God. For all these worldly things, these evil desires - the craze for sex (pleasure), the ambition to buy everything that appeals to you (possession), and the pride that comes from wealth and importance (power) - these are not from God. (1Jn: 2:15-16).* Although citizens of the North are raised with Christ’s teachings, they have not mastered these teachings.

The famous Italian poet, Dante Alighieri, in his “La Divina Commedia” identifies these three evil things in three wild beasts: a lion (symbol of power); a wolf (symbol of pleasure); a panther (symbol of possession)

What Dante Alighieri wrote about the wolf is quite interesting: *“....e di una lupa, che di tutte le brame sembiava carca nella sua magrezza, e molte genti fè già viver grame. A te convien tenere altro viaggio se vuoi campar d’esto loco selvaggio: che questa bestia per la qual tu gridi non lascia altrui passar per la sua via, ma tanto lo impedisce che l’uccide: ed ha natura sì malvagia e ria, che mai non empie la bramosa voglia, e dopo il pasto ha più fame che pria.”* (Inferno: canto I, 49-51, 91, 94-99)

The English translation of this piece of poetry is more or less like this: “a skinny and greedy wolf, which gives people a lot of troubles. If you want to survive you should walk on another path because this beast doesn’t allow other people to walk on its path and if they try, they get killed. The nature of this beast is so bad that there are no limits to its greed and after having eaten it is hungrier than before.”

Most probably, one of the real reasons behind the war against Iraq and Saddam Hussein in 1994, was the threat of the curtailment of the Western opulent way and style of life, which was in danger. However, the Western powers and almost all the Christian Churches framed the war in terms of defending the human rights of the Kuwaiti people. Would the Western powers have waged a war to defend the human rights of a country, if there had been no oil wells?

This mixture of economic-political and religious rationalization is not new. It appears in the Book of Exodus 3500 years ago. Also, when the Book of Revelation was written, the same things happened in Rome. Since history often repeats itself, we still use the same strategy to defend our vested interests.

To sum up: very clearly we can identify political and economic reasons behind the poverty and misery of the South and it is obvious countries from the “North” are partially responsible for these conditions.

As the Indian subcontinent people mainly descended from Hindu ancestors, it is interesting to note how the Gita, the most sacred book of Hinduism, talks about these three wild beasts in the form of gates, as the source of every evil on this earth:

*“There are three gates to this hell, the death of the soul: the gate of lust, the gate of wrath, and the gate of greed. Let a man shut the three. When a man is free from these three doors of darkness, he does what is good for his soul, and then he enters the Path Supreme.”*(Gita 16:21-22)

Mahatma Gandhi used to say that on this earth there is everything, which is needed to meet the needs of mankind, but there is not everything, which is needed to meet the greed of mankind.

This unjust model of distribution of wealth existing between North and South very often is reproduced within a developing country. Even the poorest of countries have a small % of wealthy supported by large numbers of poor. If one has enough courage to visit old Dhaka traveling from the residential areas of Banani, Baridara and Bashundhara, one can see the hell where poor people live in contrast to the Paradise which rich people have built. Luxurious villas, high-rise buildings, modern businesses, and sprawling schools were built and are being built by wealthy Bangladeshi citizens. Wealthy Bangladeshi people provided most of the money needed to build such modern establishments financing the projects with huge amounts of money borrowed from the Bangladesh Government. For the most part, the elite have failed to repay that money back. So, to some extent, the poor of the country are subsidizing the wealthy by providing cheap labor and by paying taxes into the coffers of a government that favors the rich.

Also, some of this money unintentionally came from the poor and middle class people of countries from the North as portions of the money destined for development projects were diverted into the pockets of the powerful. As the famous Italian journalist, Indro Montanelli wrote: aid sent to the developing countries is in actuality aid sent from the poor of the North to the rich people of the South.

In spite of Christ's examples, St. John's warnings, Dante Alighieri, Gandhi and the Gita's remarks, the people of the North and the elite few of impoverished countries have allowed those three wild beasts to devour themselves.

In order to keep up with greed, people need a strong and opulent economic system and in order to maintain this system politics of oppression is needed. Also, very often a religion, which can support both, the powerful and the oppressed adhere to that economic and political system. The Latin proverb "*Mors tua vita mea*" (Your death is my life) is quite appropriate to what we are talking about.

But it seems to us that this is only half of the story!

A couple of years ago the Xaverian Missionaries organized an international meeting at Cali in Colombia to discuss the causes and reasons of the poverty of the Southern Hemisphere. The representatives from the Xaverians working in Bangladesh were Fr. John Fagan and Fr. Lupi Pier Luigi. When these two fellows came back from Colombia we had a meeting amongst ourselves in order to be informed about what had happened at Cali.

After the report, which depicted economic causes as the main ones behind poverty and misery in the Southern Hemisphere, Fr. Lawrence Valoti stood up and disagreed with what had been reported. At that time Fr. Valoti was working in Borodol Mission, the most difficult parish of the Khulna Catholic Dioceses. Fr. Lawrence said that according to him, the greed of the people of the North had nothing or very little to do with the poverty of his miserable, lazy, hopeless, and helpless parishioners who were always fighting and quarreling amongst themselves. He argued that the roots of the miserable condition of his people were to be looked for inside them and not outside them. Briefly, he said that according to him poverty in Borodol was caused more by internal causes

than external ones: more by Indian-Hindu ways of thinking and behaving than American or European political and economic oppression. Quite a few among the Xaverian Missionaries present in that meeting agreed with Fr. Valoti.

As for poverty and misery in the Indian Subcontinent is concerned, it is felt by some that a clear distinction must be made between external and internal causes for the poverty of masses on the subcontinent. Yes, the political and economic greed of the British Raj and other colonizers in India and Bangladesh contributed to the perpetuation of an oppressive system. However, internal factors in the cultural background of the peoples of India and Bangladesh themselves have made possible a system of supporting a few in power while many remain chained in poverty.

One might ask why the developed countries of the North have been able to advance so much while the developing countries of the South have remained so undeveloped. A good number of serious philosophers and thinkers have agreed with the observation that there are two strong forces behind the progress, which has been possible in the Northern Hemisphere.

**The first force is Greek philosophy.** The three great Greek philosophers Socrates, Plato and Aristotle discovered a new way of thinking through abstract ideas. This way of thinking allows human beings to proceed in every field with full speed and not to waste time. It seems that people living in the Southern Hemisphere have a lot of difficulties with abstract thinking. They prefer stories and parables, which are more interesting and attractive for sure, but they need a lot of time to convey and express ideas.

Old people living around the Catholic Mission of Chuknagar like to express themselves through stories and parables. A fellow who was an expert in this language, died a couple of months ago. Although displeased with his death, people were happy as well because whenever Lolit Mohon Das would come to the Mission to talk, at least one hour was needed just to listen to his stories and parables through which he used to express his ideas and his requests for help.

It has been said that the people of the developed world will dominate the world forever because of this great weapon: abstract thinking.

**The second force**, which has allowed the people of the Northern Hemisphere to progress so much, **is the Bible** or Judeo-Christian background. Although, people of the North could not overcome what Christ was able to in the form of possessions, pleasure, and power, there are three revolutionary Biblical ideas that did influence the way of thinking of the people of the North. Once these ideas are identified and contrasted with ideas in Hinduism, one can see how there must be major differences in the outcomes.

The main influences from the Judeo-Christian background of people of the North are:

- the idea of nature
- the idea of human person
- the idea of history

## 1. The Idea of Nature

The first verse of the Book of Genesis says: *“In the beginning the Lord created heaven and earth”* (Gen 1:1). This is some kind of a Copernican Revolution. Nature, which is created, is not supposed to be adored and worshipped. Gen 2:15 says: *“Then*



*Yahweh God took the man and settled him in the garden of Eden to cultivate and take care of it*". And again: "God blessed them, saying to them: *"Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and conquer it."* (Gen 1:28).

We have to admit that the garden of Eden (this earth) has not been taken care of properly by people of the Northern Hemisphere. The word "conquer" has been taken so literally that we have almost killed the garden of Eden. Environmental scientists predict there is not much time to save the earth from death. Our exploitation of planet earth has produced innumerable environmental hazards so much so that we have almost killed our planet. An urgent U-turn is needed. On the other hand, this Biblical command "*conquer the earth*" is one main reason why the people of the North had so much courage to set out on the great oceans to discover new lands. It must be this command, which has given the people of the North so much inspiration and enthusiasm for scientific research, which has produced wonderful discoveries through which the quality of human life, has become easier and more enjoyable. This courage to face the mysteries of Nature was given to the people of the North by the Bible, which clearly states that there is a distinct line between creation and Creator. Only the Creator is divine: creation is not. Therefore, there are no reasons to be scared of it.

In Hinduism, the line between creation and Creator is very confused. Very often creation is the dwelling of gods and goddesses and ghosts. Therefore, creation and nature becomes something scary, something to be afraid of and therefore something to be adored, appeased, and worshipped.

There are countless examples of this fear and worship of nature among Bangladeshi people. Two may be more than enough. Some years ago, in front of the Catholic Mission of Chuknagar, the local Chairman ordered construction of a new road. A group of workers assembled and held a long discussion about the deity living inside the earth who would be disturbed by the digging up of the earth. One of the laborers said that some kind of an offering to the deity would be very appropriate and it was suggested the sacrifice of a chicken. One of the missionaries working in that Mission was present during the conversation about the deity and one of the workers jokingly said that the deity would be very pleased if she could have the white skinned man sacrificed to her. Luckily, a chicken proved to be sufficient but this story demonstrates the strong attachment to the mother earth or nature.

A second example took place at the Catholic Mission of Chuknagar, which is not very far away from the village where the Rishi people (a group of outcaste Hindu people) live. Recently, the hut of one of the Rishi villagers was falling apart. When asked if he had some money to repair it, he answered that it was not a question of money. A snake had found a comfortable place to stay in a hole in a corner of the floor and the owner of the hut would have had to drive it out to get the house repaired. Well! That poor man was afraid to do that. He was scared that something bad would happen to his family if he sent the snake away. This is worship of nature!

Also, the strong belief that almost all Bangladeshi people have about ghosts may be connected with this fear and worship of nature. This is true even of the Bangladeshi Christian people, including priests and nuns.

We know that the three religions, which sprang from the same Middle Eastern roots (Judaism, Christianity and Islam), are called "historical religions" because they have history as their foundation. Many other religions are called "natural religions" be-

cause they have come out of nature. Hinduism, the main religion of the Indian Subcontinent, is a natural religion. It has come out of natural phenomenon and most of the Hindu gods and goddesses can be related to some natural event.

Among the various writings of Bankimchandra Chattopadhyaya, one of the greatest Bengali writers, there is a very interesting article on the origin of Hindu festivals. In that article, the writer says: "It is certain that many festivals which have now assumed the shape and adopted the symbols of the worship of particular gods, were in their origin nothing more than the celebration of the advent of particular seasons of the year, or of other physical phenomena, and had no religious element in them at the beginning."

Hindu festivals may, in regard to their origin, be classified as follows:

- Solstice festivals as the Rath and Makar Sankranti.
- Astral festivals, as the Durga Puja and the Kartick Puja.
- Season festivals as the Dol Jatra and the three other full moon festivals.
- Agricultural festivals, which are in honor of Lakshmi, the Hindu Ceres.
- Mythological festivals, like the Kali Puja and the Jugaddhatri, which appear to be the most modern of all.
- Lastly, festivals, which apparently owe their origin to the popular dread of some physical agent of mischief, as the Manasa festival, celebrated to propitiate snakes.

## The Idea of the Human Person

The second Biblical revolutionary idea is the idea of human person. In this regard the Book of Genesis says: "*God created man in the image of himself, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them*" (Gen 1:27). This is another Copernican revolution! When human beings were bought and sold as slaves in the market places of Rome, Greece and Babylon and all the other famous cities of the ancient world, the writer of the Book of Genesis had enough courage to proclaim the principle of equality among men: not only equality among men but equality among women, too. Equality was something unthinkable for that time: actually, in many places of this world, this is still unthinkable.

The Indian Subcontinent is one of these places and in one of the most famous Scriptures of Hinduism we find this statement: "*A drum. an animal, an illiterate person, an out caste and a woman can be beaten at wish*" (*Manu Smriti*).

We strongly believe that without this great Biblical idea about man's (and woman's) dignity, the famous triad of the French Revolution: "*égalité-liberté-fraternité*" never would have been possible. It is conceivable that a "French-type Revolution" will never be possible in the Indian Subcontinent where the Scriptures do not even dream of equality of men.... let alone equality of men and women.

## The Idea of History

The third Biblical revolutionary idea is about human history. According to the Bible, human history is a line, which has a beginning and an end. On this historical line, the future will be better than the past. The Book of Revelation says: "*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth.. He will wipe away all tears from their eyes: there will be no*

*more death, and no more mourning or sadness. The world of the past has gone.*”(Rev 21:1a -3e)

The idea of history according to Hinduism is not a line but a revolving circle with four *yugas* (ages) or mythical divisions of cosmic time (Krta-Dvapara-Treta-Kali). During these periods, the world evolves and devolves through a series of cycles of creation, destruction and recreation. According to this idea of history the best time is not in the future but in the past. We are now in the Kali age, the evil age, the age of sorrow, misery, and want. Human beings cannot do anything to change things. They must only sit down and wait for the good times of the Krta age (the golden age, the age of happiness and plenty) which will return at the end of the Kali age. This idea of cyclical history may explain the unproductive, fatalistic attitude of the people of the Indian subcontinent which creates apathy, lethargy, inconsistency and lack of vitality so counter to Western thinking.

These three Biblical revolutionary ideas are completely absent in the cultural milieu of the Indian Subcontinent. Rather, the opposite kind of thinking is found. Nature is adored and worshipped. Equality of men (and woman) is not ingrained as a cultural value. In human history the best is in the past and not in the future. Recently, Nehru J. said something very interesting in this regard in his famous book “*Discovery of India*”: “*India must break with much of her past and not allow it to dominate the present. Our lives are encumbered with the dead wood of this past: all that is dead and has served its purpose has to go*” (p. 522).

People of the Northern Hemisphere should be grateful to their religious background for having presented them with these three revolutionary ideas, which have guided their development and progress. Many serious philosophers and historians agree on the statement that Western people (Europe-America-Australia) are very much indebted to their religious heritage for their civilizations.

For those who would like to study in depth the problem of cultural roots of poverty and misery on the subcontinent, a suggested reading is: “*I Popoli della Fame*” by Piero Gheddo. Piero Gheddo is a very famous Italian missionary priest and journalist who visited almost all the Missions stations of the entire Southern Hemisphere and has a strong first hand experience about poverty and misery in developing countries.

Many scholars, including Gheddo, have pointed out that the main actor for human development is the human person. The cultural, social, and religious idea of the human person in the Indian Subcontinent has taken its practical shape in the famous caste system, which does not seem to foster and promote human development but rather seems to hinder it. Scholars have tried to show that the caste system and its worst effect of untouchability is a great source of poverty and misery.

A few quotations from the writings of the following famous economists, writers, and politicians will be cited that further deal with this subject: Rabindranath Tagore, Swami Vivekananda, Dr.Baba Shaheb Ambedkar, Gunnar Myrdal, and Amartya Sen.

**Rabindranath Tagore.** Tagore is famous for his poetry but he also wrote many short stories and novels. His most famous novel is “*Gora*”. This quote gives a few lines from his beautiful novel of which the main theme is caste.

“Gora could not help seeing that by this weapon of tradition and custom (caste) man was sucking the blood of man and was reducing him to poverty in a merciless fashion. How often did he see how, at the time of social function, no one had the least pity for any one else. The father of one poor fellow had been suffering for a long time from some disease, and nearly all the man’s means had been expended on giving him medicines, special treatment and diet, and yet he had received not one particle of help from any one-on the contrary the people of his village insisted that his father’s chronic illness must be the penalty for some unknown sin he had committed and that he must therefore spend more money in a ceremony of penance. The unfortunate man’s poverty and helplessness were known to every one, but there was no pity for him. Gora saw that society offers no help to a man at the time of need, gives him no encouragement at the time of his misfortune, it merely afflicts him with penalties and humbles him to dust. He could see nowhere any trace of that religion which through service, love, compassion, self respect and respect for humanity as a whole, gives power and life and happiness to all. Gora saw the image of his country’s weakness, naked and unashamed, in the midst of the lethargy of village life where the blows from outside could not work so readily. During his wanderings through the village districts Gora had noticed one thing, namely, that among the Mohammedans there was something which enabled them to unite with one another. He had observed that when any misfortune or calamity occurred in a village the Mohammedans stood shoulder to shoulder in a way that the Hindus never did, and he often asked himself why there was such a great difference between communities which were such close neighbors. The answer that rose to his mind was one which he did not want to admit as the true one, for it pained him intensely to acknowledge that the Muslims were united by their religion and not only by custom and tradition”.

**Swami Vivekananda.** Swami Vivekananda is a very famous social reformer. He is the founder of a successful institution called “*Ram Krisna Mission*”. The following are quotes from his famous booklet “*Caste, Culture and Socialism*” in regard to untouchability.

“Alas! Nobody thinks of the poor of the country. They are the backbone of the country, who by their labor are producing food-these people, the sweepers and laborers, who, if they stop work for one day, will create panic in the town. But there is none to sympathize with them, none to console them in their misery. Just see, for want of sympathy from the Hindus, thousands of Pariahs in Madras are turning Christians. Don’t think this is simply due to the pinch of hunger: it is because they do not get any sympathy from us. We are day and night calling out to them: “Don’t touch us! Don’t touch us! Is there any compassion or kindness of heart in the country? If anybody is born of a low caste in our country he is gone forever. There is no hope for him. Why, what a tyranny is this! There are possibilities, opportunities and hope for every individual in this country (U.S.A.). Today he is poor, tomorrow he may become rich and learned and respected here (U.S.A.). In India there is a howling cry that we are poor, but how many charitable associations are

there for the well being of the poor? How many people really weep for the sorrows and sufferings of the millions of poor in India? Are we men? What are we doing for their livelihood, for their improvement? We do not touch them, we avoid their company! Are we men? Those thousands of Brahmans-what are they doing for the low, downtrodden masses of India? Don't touch! Don't touch! This is the only phrase that plays on their lips!

As will become evident throughout this book, untouchability is the worst effect of the caste system!

**Baba Shaheb Ambedkar.** In addition to the fame of Gandhi, in the Indian Sub-continent, another man whose life activities and studies should be equally well known to everybody is Baba Shaheb Ambedkar. He will be discussed in depth in subsequent chapters but for the moment let it be said that this great man has been the Mahatma of the Untouchables in India and in his extensive studies of the caste system he was able to discover all its negative effects. In his very famous booklet "*Annihilation of Caste*" he wrote:

"I can not see how a Socialist State in India can function for a second without having to grapple with the problems created by the prejudices which make Indian people observe the distinctions of high and low, clean and unclean. The social order prevalent in India is a matter which a Socialist must deal with. Unless he does so he can not achieve his revolution. He will be compelled to take account of caste after revolution if he does not take account of it before revolution. There is only another way of saying that, turn in any direction you like, caste is the monster that crosses your path. You can not have political reform, you can not have economic reform, unless you kill this monster".

**Gunnar Myrdal.** A famous Nobel prize winner who was a Swedish economist named Gunnar Myrdal did one of the more serious inquiries into the poverty of the Southern Hemisphere. Gunnar Myrdal wrote two extremely valuable books. The title of the first one was "*Asian Drama: an inquiry into the Poverty of Nations*". and was published in the sixties. It has been said that after Adam Smith's work on the economic problems of England 200 years ago, Myrdal's book is the most important and useful book on the economic problems of eleven Asian countries, with special attention to the Indian Subcontinent. Surprisingly enough, this book is often ignored by development workers and politicians which may be because it is a huge book (almost 2500 pages). Also, it may be because Myrdal stresses the importance of the non economic factors such as: culture, religion, traditions, customs and habits, world vision etc. of poor nations as very deep roots of poverty and under development. Through this book, economists everywhere are encouraged to look beyond the purely economic field.

The second extremely important book written by Gunnar Myrdal is "*The Challenge of World Poverty: a world anti-poverty program in outline*". The following are quotes from well-known newspapers in regard to this book:

"Here is one of the grand masters of socio-economic study whose opinions must be command the utmost attention. His approach to the population problem is convincing in its impatience and its stress on the part that has to be played by the poor

countries themselves. It is to be hoped that it will serve as a guide to politicians.” (Thomas Balogh, *The New York Times Book Review*).

“Almost all the theories about how the new nations can conquer their poverty, Gunnar Myrdal writes in a new book, are wrong. He has written an iconoclastic book....the basic thrust of his argument is persuasive and desperately urgent”. (Michael Plarrington: *The Washington Star*) “What gives Myrdal’s account such impact is the clarity and bluntness with which he shows that many of the problems are not going to be solved by foreign aid alone”. (Roger Jellinek: *The New York Times*)

The first part of this book deals with “ *The need for radical reforms in underdeveloped countries*” and the first chapter of this part talks about “*the equality issue*”.

We just produce a few quotations:

“The conclusion I have reached is that inequality and the trend towards rising inequality stand as a complex of inhibitions and obstacles to development and that, consequently, there is an urgent need for reversing the trend and creating greater equality as a condition for speeding up development”.

“Social inequality stands as a main cause of economic inequality, while ,at the same time, economic inequality supports social inequality”.

“Economic and social inequality may itself be not only a cause of the prevailing poverty and of the difficulty for a country in rising out of poverty, but also, at the same time, its consequence.

“A common characteristic of popular religion is that it acts as a tremendous force for social inertia, supporting any degree of social and economic inequality that is inherited. If ever Marx’s dictum that religion is the opiate of the people is justified, it is among the poorer masses in undeveloped countries. The existing social and economic stratification that is the product of history is supported by custom. In turn, this custom gets from religion a support that often means that the underprivileged themselves do not question, or protest against, their plight but instead look upon as ordained by the gods and the whole paraphernalia of supernatural forces.”

“The progressive leaders in the underdeveloped countries usually avoid challenging popular religion. In South Asia, even the Communists are careful not to oppose religion”.

The same happens with all those NGOs both big and small, which have flourished like mushrooms in Bangladesh and continue to receive great amount of money from Western donor agencies. The equality issue Myrdal wrote about in that book 40 years ago is still a crucial issue in the Indian Subcontinent. Equality and caste are just like the snake and the mongoose - the cat and the rat.

It would be quite interesting to mention what suggestions Myrdal made to the governments of these poor nations. Let it suffice to say that the Government of Bangladesh seems to be doing exactly the opposite of what Myrdal suggested.

Another very famous economist worthy of studying is the Nobel prize winner, **Amartya Sen**. As others noticed, Sen identified the caste system as one of the main reasons of poverty and under-development in India.

To conclude this first chapter, a quotation is given from the famous “**Mandal Commission Report**”, which was and still is the cause (a good cause!) for so many troubles in India. We will talk about this very important report at the end of this study - research. For the moment the following extract will be enough:

“The real triumph of the caste system lies not in upholding the supremacy of the Brahmin, but in conditioning the consciousness of the lower castes in accepting their inferior status in the ritual hierarchy as a part of the natural order of things. In India the caste system has endured for over 3000 years and even today there appears to be no symptom of its early demise”. “It was the all-pervasive tyranny of the caste system, which kept the lower castes socially and economically poor. The poverty of these castes stemmed from their social discrimination and they did not become socially backward because of their poverty. In view of this historical and sociological evidence does not support the view that, in the ultimate analysis, social backwardness is the result of poverty to a very large extent. In fact it is just the other way round.”

The caste system existed in this part of the world before the arrival of the so hated white skinned people who are blamed for all the evils of the colonial legacy. So, the colonizers cannot be blamed for all the ills of the subcontinent society as the main religion of the subcontinent has ingrained ideas of inferiority and superiority into the masses.

# CHAPTER 2

## HOMO HIERARCHICUS

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The history of civilization teaches that human beings have been evolving through different stages. Scientists gave the term “*Homo erectus*” to the creature that appeared when passage from the ape stage to the more hominid stage occurred. Next, when human beings started inventing things, the “*Homo faber*” emerged. Subsequently, when human thinking and philosophy appeared, the “*Homo sapiens*” group was identified. Then other kinds of sub-species followed: the “*Homo orans*”, the “*Homo heconomicus*”, the “*Homo eroticus*”...

Now that the technological era, complete with computers has begun, it will be fascinating to watch which kind of “Homo” will evolve in this millennium!

According to sociologists, two other kinds of “Homo” already exist in regard to human behavior: “*Homo aequalis*” and “*Homo hierarchicus*”.

The idea of “**Homo aequalis**” was born in the West (or in the Northern Hemisphere). Western civilization is based on the premise of equality. The claims we make against one another are made in the name of this equality. Our political life struggles to protect the principle of individual equality against all pressures that tend to invalidate it. For example, in the west, Rousseau vigorously rebelled against inequality. “All men are created equal” is a value espoused by many nations in the western world. At least in theory, Western civilization can boast of this great and wonderful principle. Admittedly, however, in practice very often among people of Western civilization “somebody is more equal than the others”, as George Orwell wrote in his famous book “Animal Farm”.

The idea of “**Homo hierarchicus**” is the idea on which the social system of the Indian Subcontinent was set up and has been going on for ages. From these two opposite ideas of homo aequalis and homo hierarchicus, two different societies were born: two societies founded on principles completely antithetical to each other.

The Bible and Christianity present *humus* (the same Latin word that “Homo” comes from) from which this idea of equality was conceived. So many examples may be found in the Bible urging the practice of treating others fairly and equally no matter whom the person is in life. In addition to the second chapter of the Book of Genesis, the Book of Exodus tries to redress things in the name of equality. The social message of the Prophets and their anger at social inequality are other examples of the egalitarian intent of the Bible. In the New Testament, the Lord’s Prayer is the Biblical passage which fosters the great principle of equality. In that prayer God’s paternity appears probably for the first time in human history in very simple words by beginning with “Our Father.” The first great effect of God’s paternity should be human kind’s fraternity, which suggests the idea of equality amongst all of God’s children.



St. Paul's letters could not be any more clear about the equality issue: *"There is no longer Jew or Greek: there is no longer slave or free: there is no longer male or female: for all of you are one in Christ"*. (Gal 3:28).

The Virgin Mary in her "Magnificat" says:

*"My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord and my spirit exults in God my Savior. He has pulled down princes from their thrones and exalted the lowly. The hungry he has filled with good things, the rich sent empty away. (Lk 1:52-53)*

The Christian message is clearly in support of equality among people without importance to rank. Western people have accepted this Christian message as one of the main pillars of their lives.

Not just westerners but most world leaders, adhered to the principles of equality when on the 10th of December, 1948 the General Assembly of the United Nations published the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In the first article, it affirms: *"All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and right. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in spirit of brotherhood"*.

Almost every country purports to believe in equality as one of the basic national principles by writing some sort of reference accordingly to equality in their constitutions. For example the Constitution of Bangladesh advocates equal rights for all citizens:

*"All citizens are equal before the law and are entitled to equal protection of the law"* (Art.27).

As is well known, equality on paper is one thing and equality in real life is another thing. On the Indian Subcontinent, the idea of equality was imported from the West and written down in constitutions. However, this idea was not and is still not the Indian-Hindu idea about treatment of each other. Hinduism does not espouse the idea of *"Homo aequalis"*. Just the opposite, Hinduism promotes the belief in and behavior of *"Homo hierarchicus"*.

Throughout Indian society, inequality expresses itself through that famous social system which is called the **"caste system"**. Hierarchy is the source of inequality. Every country has groups of "haves" and "have-nots" but what makes the caste system so damning is that one can never move or escape from one group or caste to another as one is locked into a caste for life.

In his very important book, *"Homo hierarchicus,"* the famous French anthropologist, Louis Dumont studied this idea of the Hindu-Indian mind about humans in depth. This is what is written on the back cover of this book:

*"A hundred years ago Tocqueville saw in the American nation the pure form of the Western democrat: "homo aequalis". In this important study a leading French anthropologist (Louis Dumont), views the caste system of India as the home of a contrasting human type: "Homo hierarchicus ."*

The Modern Asian Studies Review said about this book: *"Possibly the most important and stimulating theoretical work ever published on the caste system."*

When Western people, who usually know nothing at all about the caste system, inquire about such a system with people living in the Indian Subcontinent, they are very often told that the caste system does not exist any more: it is dead! Newcomers to the subcontinent are led to believe that the caste system is something that existed in the Indian Subcontinent many years ago but that it has disappeared in independent, modern and democratic India. Unfortunately daily events reported by mass media prove that the caste system is far from being dead: it is very much alive still today but in order to see it a “special eye” is needed.

Uttar Pradesh and Bihar are the two Indian States where the caste system still has its stronghold. Atrocities against the Dalits (out caste or untouchables) happen very often all over India. Dalits are still being killed for the following reasons: demanding just wages, wanting civic facilities, desiring to own land, striving for freedom from being bonded laborers, and requesting respect so they may act and live in a dignified manner.

A few years ago a very interesting book by Marc Boulet was published in French titled “*Dans la Peau d’un Intouchable*” (Seuil ed: 1994). The writer wanted to have a direct experience about what an untouchable’s life was like so he disguised himself as an untouchable and lived on the streets of Benares, the holy city of the Hindus, for a couple of months. These are a few quotations from that very interesting book:

*“Vous venez du Bihar? Là-bas le casteisme est très fort. Les journaux apportent continuellement que le Brahmanes et les Rajpoutes brûlent les maisons des enfants de Dieu (Dalit-out caste-untouchables) et violent leurs femmes. Eh bien....ouvrez les yeux! A Benares, en ville, personne ne se connaît et la ségrégation entre les castes demeure subtile. Il faut ouvrir les yeux pour la voir. Et dans les villages c’est comme chez vous au Bihar.....le castes vivent chacune dans le quartier et il ne passe pas une semaine sans qu’un enfant de Dieu (out caste people) soit battu ou brûlé ou violé ou volé. J’ai lu dans un journal qu’il y avait plus de vingt mille crimes par an commis contre les enfants de Dieu et ça augmente chaque année. C’est abominable!”* (p. 130).

*“L’Inde n’a jamais eu un Président, un Vice Président ou un Premier Ministre intouchable alors qu’un Indien sur quatre appartient à cette classe. Mais la nomination de K. R.Narayanan à ce post honorifique de couper de ruban ne signifie pas que le casteisme est mort. Juste de la poudre aux yeux! Consultez la liste des hauts fonctionnaires, celle des chefs de partis politiques, étudiez leurs noms! Le pouvoir centrale appartient toujours aux hautes castes.”*....(p. 110)

*“L’expression “droits de l’homme” n’a aucun sens en Inde. C’est un concept moral fonde sur le respect mutuel entre les citoyens, un concept égalitariste impossible à greffer sur la société hiérarchique hindoue.”* (p. 226-227)

*“L’absence de droits de l’homme naît du casteisme et donc de l’Hindouisme. Un système social d’hommes et de sous-hommes qui empoisonne l’Inde sous couverture de la religion, de Dieu. Les Occidentaux ne voient que du feu. Ils combattent à jute titre le racisme et l’antisémitisme dans le monde, mais il posent un regard indulgent sur le casteisme et considèrent qu’il appartient au patrimoine culturel indien, tel le Taj Mahal. Le casteisme ne les scandalise pas, c’est lointain et je pense que leur bienveillance naît de l’admiration qu’ils portent à la civilisation brahmanique et du dégoût que leur inspirent les balayeurs et autres intouchables confondus avec le mendiants et le lépreux pour qui ils n’envisagent qu’une charité dédai-*

*gneuse. Cette excuse culturelle du casteisme m'horripile. On pourrait pardonner de même l'antisémitisme en racontant que ça fait partie du patrimoine européen. Le casteisme est un système ségrégationniste aussi comme l'apartheid en Afrique du Sud. Aussi ignoble, aussi condamnable."* (p. 226)

Along with reports about atrocities against the Dalits, the mass media is beginning to report that people's consciousness is slowly being raised about the caste system. People are starting to think of the caste system as an institution perpetuating the denial of the rights of people. The lack of human rights is an obstacle to the social and economic progress of millions of people due to the caste system being ingrained into villages and towns across the subcontinent. Especially, the victims of this evil institution, such as low caste and out caste people, have started to protest and rebel against the system, which has kept them at a subhuman level of existence.

The story of *Phoolan Devi*, the famous Bandit Queen, tells about an outstanding woman who had enough courage to challenge the inequity of the caste system. Phoolan's struggles are recorded in a book by Mala Sen titled: "*India's Bandit Queen: the True Story of Phoolan Devi*". By literally following the events described in this book a very impressive film was produced under the name "Bandit Queen."

Born in poverty in Northern India (Uttar Pradesh), Phoolan Devi has become one of the most famous bandits in India's history: a living legend revered by millions. As a child, Phoolan felt so keenly the injustice of the caste system that she fought for her father's land rights, an unprecedented action for a woman. Her later refusal to tolerate an arranged marriage overstepped any acceptable cultural boundaries. The punishment for not playing by society's rules was that Phoolan became the victim of a dacoit (bandit) kidnapping.

However, being a tough, determined, survivor, within a year Phoolan against all odds assumed control of her own dacoit gang and became the region's most notorious bandit: responsible for robberies, hijackings, and kidnappings. In revenge for the murder of her lover and her own rape, Phoolan is said to have been responsible for the murder of 22 high caste Hindu men. She evaded capture for a year after the massacre, and her eventual surrender in 1983 was a negotiated act, which took place before thousands of people. Phoolan served 10 years in prison in connection with various crimes but was eventually released from jail when a local Government made up of low caste people came into power in Uttar Pradesh.

Once out of prison, Phoolan started a political party but she failed in a bid for a seat in the Indian Parliament in 1991. She tried again in 1996. On that occasion, the famous Bandit Queen who was once wanted dead or alive, campaigned under the watchful eyes of the State's highest-level security forces. In 1996, Phoolan Devi was elected as a Member of Parliament.

In July 2001 her enemies were able to take revenge against her and they killed her

Although Phoolan is one of the more famous rebels, Phoolan Devi has not been the only one to fight against the hierarchical order of the caste system. Almost all over India, the Dalits (untouchables) are mounting a rebellion against upper-caste privilege. This is what appeared in the Time magazine (October 20, 1997):

“They (the Dalits) are instigating a social revolution that is long overdue, one whose aim is to topple the 2500 years old Hindu caste system. Increasingly Dalits are challenging Hinduism’s tenets that a person is condemned to his caste-determining whether he becomes a doctor or a scavenger, whom he marries, which village well he drinks from, and his social standing in a complex, ordered hierarchy-all by his actions in a past life. In this rebellion the Dalits’ main weapons are education and the vote. But in rural area, where resistance to their demands for equality is entrenched, they are taking up the gun”.

It has been reported by the press that in Bihar, one of the Indian provinces where caste oppression is stronger, groups of women get training on how to use a gun in order to defend themselves from upper caste people’s violent behavior.

The Dalits of India are not sleeping anymore. They even have been able to edit their own magazine, which talks about the Dalits’ problems, dreams, failures, successes, and hopes. The name of this fortnightly magazine is “**Dalit Voice**” (The voice of the persecuted nationalities denied human rights). It was started in 1981 and has become quite famous because it speaks very clearly about all caste related problems. It also has drawn the attention of Christian sociologists, theologians and famous missionary anthropologists such as Stephen Fuchs, a missionary priest and a pioneer in anthropology research on the Dalits of India. It appears that Dalit Voice is the only magazine, which has enough courage to attack the sins of the Indian Christian Churches. Moreover, Dalit Voice rejects completely Mahatma Gandhi’s philosophy and follows literally all the ideas of Baba Shaheb Ambedkar, the great leader of the Dalits.

Those who are interested in the struggles of the Dalits of India against caste and untouchability, the great evils of Hinduism, should subscribe to this informative magazine.

Among the Dalits of India, many are Christians. These Dalit Christians, whose ancestors converted from Hinduism in an attempt to escape the social stigma attached to belonging to out caste and lower castes have found that that they are still discriminated against: both in society at large and within the church (especially the Catholic Church). Somehow, they are also discriminated against by the Government policy, which constitutionally entitles Untouchables and lower caste Hindus, who have historically been subjected to severe discrimination, to a range of benefits, including quotas for public service jobs and university places. This policy which has been adopted also for Sikhs and Buddhists is not valid for Christians, because Christianity has no official caste system. (It seems that this policy is a well-planned strategy to discourage Dalits from joining Christianity).

Many Dalit Christians say that discrimination extends beyond the issue of education and government job opportunities. About 16 million of India’s 21 million Christians are Dalits and the majority are Catholic. These Catholic Dalit Christians complain of a “superiority complex” among higher caste Christians and a very painful caste mentality in the Church. This is what appeared in “*Indian Missiological Review*” a few years ago:

“It is indeed a scandal that some local Church authorities and their caste-minded faithful should actually contribute to and perpetuate the unjust suffering of the Dalit Christians. We realize with a sense of anguish the sins of injustice and inequality

that are prevalent in the Catholic community. Our Catholics in many areas and parishes do not regard them as human beings. They have separate seating arrangements in churches, a separate hearse and separate graveyards (obviously death is not a leveler). Seats are not provided for the Dalit Christians for liturgical and nuptial services and employment opportunities not given to them in Catholic institutions.”

The National Convention of Catholics (NCC) held in Bombay in June 1989 declared the 1990 s “The Decade of the Dalit Christians” (DODC). The delegates resolved that during this decade they would mobilize resources in their dioceses to remedy the situation of injustice suffered by the Dalit Christians and create opportunities of equality for them. At the same time they would actively demand from the Government the extension of SCs (Scheduled Castes) privileges to all Indian Dalits. (*Indian Missiological Review*, June 1994, Pages 27-29).

The Indian Christian Churches have been so poisoned by this awful caste mentality that during this last decade a new type of theology was born in India. This new Indian theology is the DALIT THEOLOGY which aims at fighting against the caste system in the Church and draws from the Gospels hope for bringing forward those human rights and values denied by the church hierarchical structure and power.

The pioneer of the Dalit theology, Arvind Nirmal, was a Dalit Pastor who had to teach English to his flock in order to survive and his high caste students would not even accept a glass of water from his hands. After this bitter experience he started to develop the Dalit Theology which sees in Christ the great Dalit who suffers with all the Dalits of India who are despised, oppressed, and tortured like Him. Arvind Nirmal rejects the classic Indian Christian theology that has no involvement with social reality and is blind and deaf to the miseries of the Dalits of India. Instead of a Christian theology in dialogue with the great non-Christian religions, Arvind proposes a Dalit Theology in dialogue with all the Dalits of India, that is all the out caste and low caste, tribal, and other marginalized and oppressed people of the Indian Subcontinent.

The Dalit Theology is not a theology studied in books by professional theologians. It is a theology, which is hammered out of the desperate life experiences of the Dalits, and the Dalits, themselves, are the theologians. It is a theology by the Dalit people, for the Dalit people and with the Dalit people.

Attempts to identify the Dalit Theology with the Latin American Liberation Theology have been made. Arvind does not accept this kind of comparison. Liberation Theology has a political and economic background and purpose. Whereas, the Dalit Theology strives for a social and cultural liberation. According to the Dalit Theology, human values are more important than the economic and political ones.

It will not be easy for the Dalit Theology to destroy the concept of Homo Hierarchicus, which has produced that monster of the caste system. In order to bring forward a real social and cultural liberation, many people like Arvind Nirmal, the great suffering Dalit, will be needed to unite and struggle for implementation of equal laws and treatment for the Dalits. Fortunately, the stirrings of this movement are beginning in the Indian Christian Churches.

Also, awareness is being raised among the high caste Hindus. In March 1988, a great conference organized by the World Hindi Organization was held in Katmandu under the patronage of the King of Nepal, His Majesty Birendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev. For a couple of days, the main representatives of Hinduism all over the world discussed the problems Hinduism has to face in modern age. At the end of the conference many resolutions were passed.

The following resolutions are particularly interesting:

Resolution No 31: “Resolved that much damage has been done to Hinduism due to caste system and untouchability. So we resolve that Hinduism be a casteless society/religion and that untouchability amongst its brethren be abolished. As all Hindus are equal and all parts of God it is resolved that we eradicate these two evils of Hinduism”.

Resolution No 32: “Let the following be the slogan for the unity of all Hindus for peace: One religion and one caste, One society and one culture for all Hindus.”

These resolutions sound like the good news of the Gospel but they appear too good to be true! Many questions sprang up immediately such as:

Will these progressive resolutions ever be implemented?

Who will make arrangements so that these resolutions might be implemented?

What about the Hindu Scriptures where both caste system and untouchability have their roots? Will these Scriptures be abolished? Will the pages, which talk about caste system and untouchability, be torn up and burned? Who will have enough authority to do so?

So many other questions emerge as to how the resolutions will be carried out in reality. However, as for the above-mentioned resolutions, it must be acknowledged that eventually the representatives of Hinduism have realized that caste system and untouchability are evils to be eradicated.

In regard to Bangladesh and untouchability, Bangladesh shares the cultural background common to all the countries of the Indian Subcontinent but Bangladeshi people seem to be particularly affected by “caste blindness”. Bangladeshis deny that castes still exist in Bangladesh.

There are several reasons behind this “caste blindness.” The first one is Islam. The majority of Bangladeshi people are Muslims and Islam talks about Muslim “*umma*”, Muslim brotherhood that exists to a certain extent, but unfortunately is not as strong as it should be. “Caste mentality” (if not the actual castes), can be found among our Bangladeshi Muslim brothers almost in the same way as it is found among Hindus and the few Bangladeshi Christians but talk of the *umma* principle masks or whitewashes the underlying discrimination.

The second reason for caste blindness is this: the few people who have heard of social analysis only have an idea of Marxist-type class exploitation. It is difficult for Bangladeshi social scientists to see the caste system as a way of exploitation. Sociology,

history and even anthropology books say very little about the caste system as a source of inequality and therefore of injustice.

Another reason for “caste blindness” may be the tendency of the Bangladeshi people to blame others for their own miseries: the British, the Pakistanis, and the foreign donors. Thus, rather than looking inward culturally, they find it easier to blame others (a rather universal human trait, in all fairness).

Without searching for any reason at all for this caste blindness, it may be enough to say that people are so accustomed to hierarchical ways in social life that they do not even think there might be other ways for social relationships. Therefore caste and caste mentality is denied.

A United States Agency for International Development officer at the U.S Embassy in Bangladesh stated he has inquired about caste with his Bangladeshi colleagues (well educated people) several times. These learned elite of Bangladesh firmly maintain that caste exists in India among Hindus but Muslim people in Bangladesh do not adhere to a caste system. How liberating that would be if it were true.....!

Almost 25 years ago a very valuable and interesting book appeared in Bangladesh. Its writer, Peter Mc Nee, was a Protestant missionary who traveled over 4000 miles by motorcycle and 2000 miles by Land Rover all over Bangladesh. He visited every Protestant Mission Station and most Catholic stations in the country to make a survey of the whole of Bangladesh to define the nature of the church, its ethnic makeup, and background. The results of this survey were published in this book: *“Crucial issues in Bangladesh”*.

In the beginning of the first chapter, Peter Mc Nee wrote:

“In Bangladesh one is often deceived into thinking that caste no longer exists. This is probably because Muslim society, to the outsider, looks like a casteless society and certainly claims to be, while Hindu society, under the pressure of Islam has adapted its outward appearance in the matters of eating and defilement. Because of the economic situation many persons have given up their traditional caste occupations. The Basic Democracies” structure of local government introduced by President Ayub Khan in 1960 replaced the caste-wise system of government, which existed in many places and did away with caste as political organization. All these points are no doubt part of the confusion. But perhaps the most important factor is that missionaries (and foreigner.), believing all men were created equal, don’t feel any need to give time to this man made matter of caste. This has a blinding effect and has led many into the trap of seeing only individuals instead of castes (“peoples”) in their social and cultural setting.” (p. 1).

Peter Mc Nee wrote that interesting book to give missionaries advice and suggestions on how to plant Christian churches in Bangladesh. According to his findings caste and caste mentality in Bangladesh both among Hindus and Muslims has still such a strength that missionaries can not and must not underestimate it. Peter Mc Nee rather suggests using caste as a vehicle to spread the Gospel and plant Christian Churches. The strategy Peter Mc Nee suggests is to concentrate missionary efforts on a homogeneous

sociological unit of people (caste) until the entire group (caste) has joined the Church. The butterfly type missionary work won't be either productive or successful.

We quote Peter Mc Nee again:

“Here I think is the answer to the question of caste. Hinduism over a long period of time and history has developed a particular type of society in the Indian Subcontinent. Westerners can see the difference which castes create for what they are—man's invention. But in our eagerness to build brotherhood in the Kingdom of God we must not act as though the differences do not exist. We must evangelize the castes of society as castes, humbly working with God as He brings men to Christ and transform both the caste and the society so that the oneness of Christian brotherhood can eventually know its fullness.” (page 37).

Peter Mc Nee may be right! Studying the Mass Movements (groups of out caste people joining Christianity) in India it appears that nowhere had one Mission or Church been effective in winning large numbers of any two castes at the same time in the same place. The same seems to be true in Bangladesh. In the southwestern part of Bangladesh (Khulna District) the only group who has joined Christianity is the group of the Rishi-Mochis (untouchables). It is most unlikely that other groups (castes) will become members of the Church.

So, foreigners new to this country, must take into consideration the impact of centuries of breeding of “Homo hierarchicus” and realize that in the Bangladeshi society equality does not exist. One is either on a higher or on a lower stair of the social ladder, no matter which religion one claims.

One glaring example of a hierarchical pattern is evident in the Catholic Church. The church is basically made up of three groups: the descendants of the Portuguese who live in Dhaka, the tribal people from such areas as Chittagong, and the Nomosudras and Mochi Rishis of the Khulna District. The “Portuguese” Christians feel and act superior as if they were the real owners of the Catholic Church in Bangladesh. The Bishops, the top management of Caritas Bangladesh, and Superiors of nuns’ convents all come from this group. The second group of Christians is still considered uncivilized since tribal people live in forests. The last group is labeled with the word “New Christians” because both Rishi Mochis and Nomosudras joined Christianity a couple of decades ago. In reality though, the word “new” does not really mean new: very often it means “rubbish” as this is what is thought of the lowest caste by others who claim to have long ago left Hinduism.

After working with the Catholic Church of Khulna for more than 25 years, I regretfully must say that this hierarchical attitude and caste mentality is not only present among the parishioners of the Catholic Church of the Khulna Dioceses but can be seen even among the local priests who are divided into three very well defined hierarchical groups. Unfortunately, nothing is said or done against this lamentable situation.

In this regard, what Father John Fagan wrote more than twenty years ago in his short research paper on *“The Mochi Untouchables: a People Set Apart”* should be remembered:

“It seems to me that this question of caste is an important one for the Church to face, even the Church of Khulna. In India it seems that the Church is going along



lines of accommodation and seeing caste distinctions as only a social question. Some prefer to ignore the question in the hope that it will go away. The historical evidence in India is against this Brahminism that has always reasserted itself. If we do not face the issue do we not run the risk of becoming irrelevant or a failure as the Church was for Dr.Ambedkar in 1950?" (p. 17).

Many, including myself, working in this part of the world, fully agree with what John Fagan wrote many years ago. The caste system and caste mentality are such a monster that it will not die on its own. A war must be waged against it and in order to win this war many battles will be needed.

Stratification in the church is just one example of the extent the caste system has permeated throughout Bengali society.

Besides being the land of rivers, Bangladesh also has become the land of NGOs.

NGOs have grown all over the country like mushrooms and are busy with human development. We think that real human development must address the question of the caste system and caste mentality. To date, few NGOs have studied the issue but one exception is Uttaran, the leading NGO in the southwestern area of Bangladesh. Its leaders understand the importance and the necessity of studying this detrimental human - imposed social custom and are determined to do some kind of pioneering work in this field.

In addition, it is hoped that the foreign diplomatic Embassies and donor agencies, which are flooding the country with help, will gain some ideas about caste in order to avoid the mistake of aiding and assisting undeserving people on the top rung (or higher rungs) of the social ladder while ignoring the bottom rung who remain marginalized, ignored, poor, and uneducated.

Anywhere in the world, it is extremely difficult to help impoverished and ostracized people better themselves in a long-term manner but in the Indian Subcontinent helping poor people is even more difficult partly due to the caste system. This centuries old ingrained system makes it almost impossible for members of the lowest castes or out castes to rise above their suppressed status so they remain in uneducated squalor. The lowest and out castes are not culturally allowed to better their lot in life.

"Hic sunt leones": (here are the lions) was written on ancient maps describing places full of wild beasts. Those who want to do something useful and valid for the human development of poor people in this country must study the maps showing the places where the "lions of caste" still live.

# CHAPTER 3

## CASTE IN ACTION

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One of the predominant tenets of Hinduism is the division of its adherents into certain groupings or castes. One's total existence and identity from birth to death is based on the caste into which one belongs. Therefore, the system of dividing Hindus into social groupings will be examined in this chapter.

First of all, the Hindu society may be divided into two main groups:

- Caste Hindus (Savarna Hindus)
- Non caste Hindus (Avarna Hindus)

Of the caste Hindus, one of the most important books of Hinduism, the *Manav Dharma Shastra* or *Manu Smriti* or *Manu Shamhita* says that there are only four castes...there is no fifth (Manu 10:4).

The four castes may be divided into two groups:

- High castes-Dvijas-Traivarnikas: which are castes that evolved out of the three varnas of Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and Vaishyas
- Low castes: which are castes that evolved out of the Shudras or the fourth varna

Non caste Hindus are divided into two groups:

- Primitive tribes
- Untouchables

The British used to include in their census another group, which they used to name "Criminal Tribes." Most probably this group has disappeared from the Indian Subcontinent.

Even though, the Hindu Scriptures refer again and again to only these four castes, actually nobody knows the exact number of castes which have evolved out of the four castes or "*varnas*" mentioned in the holy books of Hinduism. Therefore, what that famous book '*Manab Smriti*' states is not actually true: the number of castes in the Scriptures may be limited to four but in reality its number is almost unlimited. Hinduism is a religion with so many contradictions: this is just one!

Moreover, except for the Primitive Tribes, who have developed a non-hierarchical social pattern, the Untouchables (non-caste Hindus) have adopted a caste system amongst themselves. They also are divided into a myriad of groups, which can be considered as real castes, because they follow the same pattern of the caste system.

From the formation of all these castes we can notice something very interesting in the Indian culture which is the tendency towards fission (the inclination for the whole to break into smaller units). The four varnas or castes, which have produced a myriad of other castes and the further separation of the castes into subcastes, are examples of this

tendency. This cultural tendency of fission can be seen everywhere and continues up until the present. Divisiveness is present in families: usually brothers' ties break up after their father's death. It is present in business: when a shop starts selling particular things in a particular area very soon many other shops of the same kind will appear in the same area. It is present in politics. It is present in religious business: how many Christian Churches are there in Bangladesh? Not to mention the NGOs which have been growing up like mushrooms in this country.

Usually when referring to the various divisions of people within Hinduism, foreigners and Indians familiar with English use the word caste. The word 'caste' is of Latin origin. 'castus' (the English words 'chaste and chastity' come from this term) in Latin stands for 'pure-something not mixed'. The word seems to have been used in the sense of race by the Spaniards and to have been applied to India by the Portuguese in the middle of the fifteenth century. Through this word, the early Portuguese settlers in India used to describe the different sections of the Hindu community which were divided into distinct 'castas' of greater or less dignity and blood purity. It seems that a Portuguese gentleman named Garcia de Orta was the first to use this word. In English the word 'cast' in the sense of race appears in 1555.

The English word 'caste' is used to denote both varna and *jati*, which are words, used and understood by those from the Hindi culture. Varna usually refers to one of the four main categories into which Hindu society is traditionally divided. The word varna means also 'color' which will be discussed at a later point when referring to the origin of the caste system. Jati refers generally to a much smaller group: for example the various groups which have evolved out of the four varna-castes or out of the many out caste and untouchable groups would be considered jati. Most probably the Latin word 'gens-gentis' is related to the word 'jati'. The Indian sense (i.e. caste as denoting both varna and jati) appears at the beginning of the eighteenth century and has been used in that context since then.

During the last few centuries many scholars have studied the caste system in depth. A few of the most important and famous among them, along with a few words about their discoveries are listed below:

**Abbè Jean–Antoine Dubois** (1765-1848): was a French missionary priest who left France at the outbreak of the French Revolution and lived for thirty two years in southern India. He tried to understand society and religion of the subcontinent. This resulted in him finally giving an excellent description of his studies in his famous book: "*Hindu Customs, Manners and Ceremonies*". Abbè Dubois is considered the father of Indian anthropologists. According to him, in spite of all its demerits, the caste system is the "chef-d'oeuvre" of Indian legislation.

**James Mill** (1773-1836): was a Scottish historian, philosopher and economist. In 1806 he began his "History of British India", 3 vol. (1817) in which he wrote about the origin of the caste system, describing it and criticizing it. Although this was Mill's greatest literary achievement, he never actually visited India.

**Roberto De Nobili** (1577-1656): was an Italian Jesuit missionary priest who worked in South India (Madurai) in the first half of the seventeenth century. He

refused to associate himself with the other missionaries working among low caste Hindus and carried on his missionary experiments only among high caste Hindus arguing that caste is just a social matter and not a religious one. His missionary strategy proved to be quite successful but at the end was rejected by Roman Catholic authorities. Many people in India today blame Roberto de Nobili for having sown the seeds of casteism in the Indian Catholic Church.

**Max Muller:** is the most famous Indologist and scholar of the Sanskrit language. Like Roberto De Nobili, Max Muller inquired about the nature of caste. He reached the conclusion that, contrary to what Hindus often imagine, caste has no place in the Vedas, which, for the Hindus, contain all revelation. Therefore, caste is not a religious matter but only a social institution which is doubtless well adapted to the circumstances and if it were destroyed overnight more evil than good would ensue.

**Max Weber** (1864-1920) was a German sociologist and economist. Max Muller's and Roberto de Nobili's ideas are found again more or less unchanged in the works of this scholar for whom caste is a particular kind of a status group or estate, in the sense of the three estates of the Ancien Regime in France before the French Revolution. Following these scholars' theories nowadays many educated Hindus try to teach foreigners that caste has nothing to do with religion: caste is only a social institution. It would be nice if the situation was as simplistic as that!

**John C. Nesfield:** was a serious anthropologist who had the merit of studying one of the main features of the caste system: hierarchy.

**J. H. Hutton:** was another anthropologist who recognized the religious aspect of caste. The name of his book is "*Caste in India, Its Nature, Function and Origins*".

**Emile Senart:** was a French scholar who developed the racial theory of caste, which goes back to the most ancient period of Indian history and the Indo-European and Dravidian theory. The name of his book is: "*Les castes dans l'Inde. Le Faits et le Système*"

**H. H. Risley:** was the author of the unsurpassed book: "*Tribes and Castes of Bengal*" published in 1891. In this famous book the various castes and their occupations are listed. This book is as well known as the book written by the French missionary Abbé Dubois.

**Celestin Bougle:** another French scholar who studied the caste system stressing the importance of the opposition between pure and impure. He wrote: "*Essai Sur le Regime des Castes*".

**Louis Dumont:** was another French anthropologist previously mentioned. Bougle's theory about the opposition between pure and impure was the starting point of Louis Dumont's research which appeared in Dumont's famous book cited earlier: "*Homo Hierarchicus*".

The list may be completed with the names of three important and famous Indian anthropologists.

**Andr  Beteille**, professor of Sociology at Delhi School of Economics and author of a famous book: “*Caste, Class and Power*”. The book is an intensive study of the changing patterns of social stratification reacting to outside pressures in a multi-caste village in South India.

**Govind Sadashiv Ghurye**, a brilliant scholar in Sanskrit, Indology, Anthropology and History and Professor Emeritus of Bombay University. His book “*Caste and Race in India*” has remained a basic work for students of Indian sociology and anthropology and has been acclaimed by teachers and reviewers as a sociological classic.

**M. N. Srinivas** is the author of “*The Remembered Village*”. The Economic Times of Bombay stated the following about Srinivas’ work: “*We have here a monograph that can not be too highly praised for his excellence.*”

Last but certainly not the least of the Indian authors who studied the caste system in depth was **Baba Shaheb Ambedkar**. He not only wrote about the caste system but he led people to struggle against the oppression as a result in blindly accepting this artificial division of humanity. His writings have been translated into Bengali. Ambedkar’s booklet on the bad effects of the caste system named “*Annihilation of Caste*” must be read by those who want to have a complete idea of this social institution.

After having become acquainted with the most important scholars and their studies and research on the caste system, a few quotes of their definitions of caste will be given.

Senart defines a caste as:

“a close corporation, in theory at any rate rigorously hereditary: equipped with a certain traditional and independent organization, including a chief and a council, meeting on occasion in assemblies of more or less plenary authority and joining together at certain festivals: bound together by common occupations, which relate more particularly to marriage and to food and to questions of ceremonial pollution, and ruling its members by the exercise of jurisdiction, the extent of which varies, but which succeeds in making the authority of the community more felt by the sanction of certain penalties and, above all, by final irrevocable exclusion from the group.”

According to Sir H. Risley

“a caste may be defined as a collection of families or groups bearing a common name which usually denotes or is associated with a specific occupation, claiming common descent from a mythical ancestor, human or divine, professing to follow the same professional callings and are regarded by those who are competent to give an opinion as forming a single homogeneous community.”

Maybe the best definition of caste has been given by Beteille:

“Caste may be defined as a small and named group of persons characterized by endogamy, hereditary membership and a specific style of life which sometimes includes the pursuit by tradition of a particular occupation and is usually associated with a more or less distinct ritual status in a hierarchical system, based on the concepts of purity and pollution.”

From these definitions, it is evident how caste functions and the main characteristics of the system which seem to be the following:

- hierarchy
- inequality of rights and privileges
- division of labor
- purity and pollution
- prohibition of interdining
- prohibition of intermarriage

Of course, some things have changed in the Indian Subcontinent so these features of the caste system are not exactly as they were in the past. However, it seems that almost all of these features are still quite prevalent! Therefore each characteristic listed above will be examined.

## 1 - Hierarchical organization

These are Ambedkar's observations about the hierarchical organization of the caste system:

“The first striking feature of the caste system is that the different castes do not stand as a horizontal series all on the same plane. It is a system in which the different castes are placed in a vertical series one above the other. In the scheme of Manu (the mythical Indian lawgiver), the Brahmin is placed at the first rank; below him is the Kshatriya; below Kshatriya is the Vaishya; below Vaishya is the Sudra; and below Sudra is Ati-Sudra (the Untouchables). This system of rank and gradation is a permanent social relationship among the classes to be observed-to be enforced- at all times in all places and for all purposes.” (*Writings and speeches*; vol 3, p. 25)

“The principle of graded inequality is a fundamental principle in the Hindu social order. There is no sphere of life, which is not regulated by this principle. This order of precedence among the classes (castes) is not merely conventional. It is spiritual, moral, and legal.” (id. p. 107)

“Caste forms an hierarchy in which one caste is at the top and is the highest: another at the bottom and it is the lowest and in between there are castes every one of which is at once above some castes and below some castes. The caste system is a system of gradation in which every caste except the highest and the lowest has a priority and precedence over some other castes.” (id. p. 45)

“This hierarchical organization of the caste system is responsible for producing a social psychology, which is noteworthy. In the first place it produces a spirit of rivalry among the different castes for dignity. Secondly it produces an ascending scale of hatred and descending scale of contempt.” (id. p. 48).

To add to Ambedkar's observations, it seems that the hierarchical organization of the Hindu society has created in people a hierarchical mentality, which is visible at every level. For example, there are three personal pronouns of the Bengali language:

- *Apni* (formal you)
- *Tumi* (familiar you)
- *Tui* (may show affection between children and grownups but when used on the lower castes, it shows their inferiority)

Aren't these three simple words used to express a very clear hierarchical relationship?

In the Bengali language two other words which are very important for Western people seem to be missing: please and thank you! Most probably these two words are missing because in a hierarchical relationship there is some kind of a contractual relationship where gratuity is absent: therefore those two words are neither necessary nor important.

This hierarchical mentality appears very clearly in people's everyday life. It is present among old people, young people and even children. On the staircase of hierarchy nobody is equal to anybody: either he or she is a step up or a step down. Often, the subtleties escape the foreigners' eyes, especially those new to the country. Yet the unspoken concept of hierarchy dictates all behavior, whether it is noticed or unnoticed.

For example, from time to time Caritas people come to our house in Chuknagar, usually by car. From the verandah of our house we observe the entourage getting out of the car. As they approach our house, the big boss from Dhaka walks or struts in front of the group. The Regional Director of Caritas Office in Khulna follows. Behind him there is the officer in charge of Caritas office in Dumuria. Then, the supervisor of the Caritas Feeder Schools around Dumuria follows. The last fellow is the driver. When they enter our house nobody sits down until the big boss and all the other ones are seated. Nobody thinks to call the driver in and he wouldn't dare to enter on his own initiative. The driver comes in only if we call him however if that is done, we realize that all the others seated at the table are not very happy with his presence. From time to time it happens that "*boro manush*" (big men) object against the presence of "*choto manush*" (small manush).

The same hierarchical attitude is seen during public functions and ceremonies. Every public function needs a chairperson, a chief guest, a special guest and an honorable guest and other people all ranked according to their dignity and importance. The same attitude is evident during the serving of meals. During these social events hierarchy is never forgotten as there is a definite "pecking order" as to who gets served first, who gets served last, and who does not even get served.

Among Christian people, communion instead of hierarchy is supposed to exist. Many missionaries cannot accept the fact that people make a clear distinction between the *boro* father and the *choto* father and the foreign priests insist that their parishioners treat the parish priest and his assistant equally in all respects. But the foreigners forget that equality is not a mental attitude of their people who are accustomed to hierarchy at every level. The Bangladeshi clergy do not make this demand as they usually follow this hierarchical pattern. Parishioners have the tendency of discussing problems only with the parish priest. The assistant parish priest is usually completely ignored. The attitude of hierarchy is further seen in the superior behavior of the parish priest towards his

assistant. One last example of the hierarchical behavior within Christianity is the way Christian people take communion. Often it is adult men first; then young men; next adult women followed by young ladies and children at the end.

As a concluding remark about this first feature of the caste system, it can be said that this hierarchical mentality is another pillar of the culture of the Indian Subcontinent and its effects are quite deleterious for human development. Hierarchical mentality creates a 'lean on' mentality and a patronage mentality. A patronage mentality discourages personal initiative. Lack of personal initiative creates poverty. On the other hand, hierarchical mentality grows only where resources are limited and poverty and misery exist. So it will not be so easy to break this vicious circle.

This point will be further examined when exploring the negative side effects of the caste system. For further illumination, a suggested reading is an extremely valuable book which deals with this matter: "*Poverty and Behavior in Bangladesh*" by **Clarence Maloney**, an American anthropologist.

## 2 - Inequality of rights and privileges

There is a sentence in the Gospel according to Matthew, which could be very suitable to explain this second feature: "*For to everyone who has will be given more and he will have more than enough: but from the man who has not even what he has will be taken away.*" (Mt 25:29). Of course, according to Christian exegesis this sentence is not to be interpreted literally. But a literary interpretation applied to the second feature of the caste system is not out of place.

Mathematically speaking, this second feature could be expressed like this: plus is added to plus and minus is added to minus. That is: those who were lucky enough to be born on the high steps of the social ladder and already have everything will be offered every chance and opportunity to increase their rights and privileges. Those who were unlucky enough to be born on the low steps of the social ladder and are the 'have nots' will not have either the chance or the opportunity to improve their lot in life. In regard to the distribution of the good things of life, those who are acknowledged as being the highest must get the most and those who are classified as the lowest must accept the least and the worst. We usually say "*To each according to his need.*" This second feature of the caste system says: "*To each according to his nobility*".

This idea is expressed very well in the Bengali sentence: "*telo mathae tel deoa*" that translates "pour oil on a head already full of oil". There is another saying in Bengali, which expresses the same idea: "*Telo mathae dao tel-shukno mathae bhango bel*". (Pour oil on a head which has oil and break a "*bel*" (a fruit which has a hard skin) on the head which is without oil. In other words, add plus to plus and minus to minus).

In order to gain a better understanding of the privileges of the high castes, it is sufficient to read a few chapters of the book which is some kind of a manual of the caste system among the Hindu Scriptures: '*The Manu Smriti* or *Manu Shamhita* or *Manab Dharma Shastra*'. According to this degrading and infamous book, the Brahmins (the 1<sup>st</sup> caste) enjoy every kind of rights and privileges and the Sudras (the fourth caste) and the fifth group (the out caste-Untouchables) have to suffer every kind of discrimination.



Certainly, things have changed to a great extent over the past few decades and the laws of the *Manu Smriti* are not observed literally any more but the mentality of that book is still present in people's daily behavior. The English proverb "*Might is right*" suits society's behavior very well. The strong, powerful, and rich person is honored, respected, and given every kind of golden opportunity. Meanwhile, the poor, weak and powerless people are kicked like dogs. To add insult to injury, after being kicked they are blamed which is the age-old trick of blaming the victims.

This second feature of the caste system is visible everywhere. For example, a decade or so in Bangladesh, the NGO movement started. There was a glimmer of hope that all these NGOs with their 'visions' and 'missions' would be able to change and improve the lot of poor people in this country. To date, things did not turn out as was hoped. Unfortunately, the greatest result of the NGO movement was and is the opportunity of employment for many educated or semi-educated young men and young ladies. Naturally, these NGO workers do not come from the poorest and weakest social groups: most of the employees come out of the world of the bold, the rich, and the beautiful of Bangladesh.

Christianity is supposed to reverse things: to add minus to plus and plus to minus. The Virgin Mary's "*Magnificat*" (see Lk 1:51-53) should be taken seriously by Christians wherever it is preached. Unfortunately it appears that Christianity has not been able to reverse things in the Indian Subcontinent. It seems that Indian Churches have accommodated themselves according to the well-defined and well-established cultural and social patterns of Hinduism. Therefore most of the Christian institutions which were set up to serve the poor, end up hiring the elite and continue to ignore the plight of the most needy amongst the citizens of the country.

Dr. Ambedkar's observations about Christian institutions in India are stated here:

"It is necessary to bear in mind that Indian Christians are drawn chiefly from the Untouchables and, to a much less extent, from low ranking Shudra castes. The services rendered by the Missions in the fields of education and medical relief are beyond the ken of the Indian Christians. They go mostly to benefit the high caste Hindus. The Indian Christians are either too poor or too devoid of ambition to undertake the pursuit of higher education. In the same way much of the medical aid provided by the Missions goes to the caste Hindus. This is especially the case with regard to hospitals." (*Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 5, p. 452)

Although, Dr. Ambedkar wrote his observations about 40 years ago, it seems that some things remain the same: at least for pockets of oppressed untouchables living in Bangladesh and parts of India. One modern day example are the prestigious Christian education institutions in Bangladesh such as the well known schools run by Christians in Dhaka, Khulna or Jessore. Who can have access to these schools?

Also, what about the most famous social institution of the Catholic Church in Bangladesh: Caritas? When Caritas officers and employees travel about the country to talk to people they usually start by saying that Caritas is a Latin word which means 'love.' One must ask, "Love for whom?" We hear that a high ranking officer of Caritas Bangladesh gets a salary, which is more than 50 thousand takas per month while a Cari-

tas Feeder School teacher is only paid 600 hundred taka per month. In addition to a high salary, the Caritas officer has three telephones, a computer and goes around the country comfortably seated in the latest model, air-conditioned vehicle. In contrast, the Caritas Feeder School teacher has to walk either in the mud or under the scorching sun because he cannot even afford an old bicycle. It is difficult to promote this work of Caritas as acts of love!

It seems that once again this so well preached love is love for the bold, the rich and the beautiful.

Some accountability must be demanded of the leaders of the Catholic Church in Bangladesh (and any other Christian organization) committing the mistakes of demonstrating discriminatory behavior of helping the rich become richer while keeping the poor malnourished, uneducated, and without tools to lift themselves out of their abject misery. Who will answer questions about accountability and who will take responsibility for ignoring the most needy? The Bishops should do that but most probably they won't have time for this because they are so busy building their cathedrals.

Very often and very easily, foreign missionaries also fall into this second trap of the caste system as privilege for some is so ingrained in this culture. This simple question should be enough to examine our conscience: "Do we behave with everybody in the same way?" If we are sincere we have to admit that we behave more gently with the 'haves' and more rudely with the 'have nots.'

It seems, though, in the Indian Subcontinent there are positive signs for hope: missionaries, priests and nuns are being killed and murdered. As odd as it may sound that murder might be a sign of hope... it seems the main reason for their deaths may be their attacks on the 'status quo.' Hence, the rich, the bold and the beautiful feel threatened in their security. High caste people do not want things to change, injustices redressed and cultural norms reversed so the easiest way to react is to get rid of those troublemakers who disrupt their privileges.

According to the law of Christianity the more martyrs we have the more the Gospel of Christ will triumph. So let's hope that the Lord may bless many of our Indian Christian brothers and sisters with the grace of martyrdom.

### 3 - Division of labor- hereditary occupation

Every caste has its occupation and specialization, which is hereditary. This means that a group of people must follow their ancestors' occupation whether this occupation is liked or not and whether it is profitable or not. In this way, the Brahmins will be busy with religious matters for 'saecula saeculorum' and the Untouchables will have to be sweepers, scavengers, cobblers, washer men, barbers etc. until the world comes to an end. Every member of a specific caste must follow the trade assigned to that group of people. There is no scope for individual choice and inclination. Admittedly, things have changed in this area but mainly only for the higher castes. The principle of inequality of rights and privileges works very well in this regard. Moreover, if a bit of nepotism is added things become even easier. Since those on the bottom rung of the social ladder have no rights and privileges, it is extremely difficult for low caste and out caste people to get out of this prison.

There are two main reasons for the abandonment of hereditary occupations: one economic and the other social. The first is connected with machinery, modern mills, and factories. Weaving castes for example have had to give up weaving because goods made in mills and factories are better and cheaper than their hand loom products. The same can be said for so many other castes, which once upon a time were busy with handicrafts.

The second reason to change occupations is the ambition of the low castes to raise themselves in social esteem by adopting occupations or professions, which are more deserving of respect than their ancestral ones. Unfortunately, adoption of new and more respectful occupations does not always help low caste or out caste people to get rid of the stigma of impurity and pollution attached to their professions. A Chamar whose ancestral profession was to work with hides and leather will not be able to gain very much in terms of respect and human dignity only by changing his occupation.

It appears that very rarely does an individual try to change occupations. The difficulties that one has to face are so many and so strong that usually attempts to change occupations or professions are made by a group rather than an individual person.

For a variety of reasons, among the out caste Rishis of Chuknagar Village (Dumuria-Khulna) only a few people are still engaged in the traditional occupation of the group: leather work. The majority of the Rishis of that village have opted for other kinds of works so now there is the group of the ‘*van gari pullers*,’ the group of the ‘rickshaw pullers,’ the group of the ‘baby taxi drivers,’ and the group of the porters. It seems as if there is “safety in numbers” when changing occupations.

In order to break down this fourth feature of the caste system many things are needed: just small credit loans will not be enough. In Bangladesh, all the NGOs are now busy with credit programs but in order to successfully change occupations and professions the following are necessary: training, financial management, technical know how, and skills development. The NGO movement could help out caste and low caste people to escape from the cage of poverty where they have been kept for ages but a new strategy is needed. Amartya Sen’s economic theories should be studied and together with a microcredit program, a culture of human solidarity and advancement should be promoted.

A recommended reading in concurrence with the above statements is an article which appeared on Vidyajyoti – February 1998: “*Church’s commitment to the Poor in the age of Globalization*”, by Felix Wilfred.

#### 4 - Purity and pollution

The first anthropologist who studied this very important feature of the caste system was Bogle. Subsequently, Louis Dumont continued conducting research on this aspect of the caste system in his famous book: “*Homo hierarchicus*”. These two social scientists say that one of the most striking feature of the caste system is the opposition of the pure and impure. After all, the meaning of the word ‘casta’ used by the Portuguese was quite appropriate to express this idea of purity and its opposite, which is pollution.

“This opposition underlines hierarchy, which is the superiority of the pure to the impure: underlines separation because the pure and the impure must be kept separate and underlines the division of labour because pure and impure occupations must likewise be separate.” (*Homo hierarchicus*, p. 81)

If this theory is true then the notion of pure and impure is at the basis of the caste system. This means that at the top of the caste system we have castes, which enjoy the privilege of purity and gradually going down towards the bottom of the social ladder we have castes, which are marked with signs of impurity and pollution. So the Brahmans shine with purity and the Untouchables will stink as dirty dogs and as such will be segregated outside villages. This is precisely what has happened to the Untouchables of India.

A very good short film which helps to understand this opposition between pure and impure, is *Satgati* (Deliverance). Prem Chad, a famous Indian writer, who showed a lot of interest towards the Untouchables of India, bases the film on a short story. The famous Bengali film Director Sattyajit Ray who died a few years ago made this film. In this beautiful film the relationship between a Brahmin and an Untouchable is shown and the opposition between pure and impure appears very clearly.

The same opposition of purity and impurity appears in another disturbing Indian short film based on a different short story by the same Prem Chad. The name of this short film is *Thakurka Khua* (the well of the Brahmin). The plot of the film involves a very sick Untouchable who needs clean and pure water, which is available only at the Brahmin's house. The Untouchable's wife is not allowed to get water from the Brahmin's well because she is impure. So she tries to steal some water at night time but the Brahmin detects her and chases her with his men to punish her. The struggles of the Untouchables are graphically shown through the efforts of one woman trying to procure something as simple as clean water.

Indian people seem to be haunted by this incomprehensible idea of external purity and pollution. One of the most famous novels about the Untouchables was written by Mulk Raj Anand, a famous Indian novelist who shows an enormous amount of sympathy to the Untouchables. The main character of his novel is Bakha, a latrine cleaner and a sweeper. The novel became a best seller and has been translated into more than 40 languages. The preface to this novel was written by E. M. Forster, the famous writer of “*A Passage to India*”. This is what Forster says in the preface:

“What a strange business has been made of this business of the human body relieving itself. Indians, like most Orientals, are refreshingly frank: they have none of our complexes about functioning: they accept the process as something necessary and natural, like sleep. On the other hand they have evolved a hideous nightmare unknown to the west: the belief that the products are ritually unclean as well as physically unpleasant and that those who carry them away or otherwise help to dispose of them are outcastes from society. Really it takes the human mind to evolve anything so devilish. No animal could have hit on it. As one of Mr. Anand's character says: ‘They think we are mere dirt because we clean their dirt.’ The sweeper is worse off than a slave, for the slave may change his master and his duties and may even become free, but the sweeper is bound for ever, born into a state from which he can not escape and where he is excluded from

social intercourse and the consolation of religion. Unclean himself he pollutes others when he touches them. They have to purify themselves and to rearrange their plans for the day. Thus he is a disquieting as well as a disgusting object to the orthodox as he walks along the public roads, and it is his duty to call out and warn them that he is coming. No wonder that the dirt enters into his soul and that he feels himself at moments to be what he is supposed to be.” (Mulk Raj Anand, *Untouchable*, p. 8).

This irrational idea of purity and pollution seems to be the key to understand untouchability, the worst effect of the caste system. After all is said and done, one cannot deny the existence of untouchability (this mortal sin of Hinduism) which is still committed by Hindus, Muslims and Christians as well. The Untouchables of the Indian Subcontinent are still neglected, marginalized and very much discriminated against. These are the exact people Christian Churches should be busy with because these people were Jesus Christ’s favorite associates. These are the people for whom and among whom Caritas Bangladesh should have its best development projects. Unfortunately the general impression is that these people not only are neglected by the greater society but also by Christianity as well as they are still considered to be dirty and impure.

Jesus Christ was the first person who reversed things about purity and pollution. The Gospel according to Mark is quite clear in this regard. (See Mk 7:14-24). Our sub-continent Christian brothers and sisters must study the “counter culture” of the Gospel and then enact the teachings amongst the out castes.

This fourth feature of the caste system would need many pages to be understood properly. Those who are interested in the concept of purity and pollution might want to read the second chapter of “*Homo hierarchicus*”, which deals with this characteristic of Hinduism. Another very valuable book on this subject is “*Women, Pollution and Marginality: Meanings and rituals of Birth in Rural Bangladesh*” by Thérèse Blanchet, especially the first part of the book, which deals with this matter of purity and its opposite, pollution, in both Brahmanical Hinduism and Islam.

The idea of repulsion and separation encourage the following two features of Hinduism. Members of a caste avoid interaction with others, which also takes into account purity vs. impure groups.

## 5 - Prohibition of intermarriage

One consequence of that irrational idea of purity and pollution is a very strict isolation and fixation of people, which appears in two main ways:

- prohibition of intermarriage
- prohibition of interdining

Prohibition of **intermarriage** is a very important feature of the caste system. Marriage must be endogamous, that is between the members of the same caste. We quote Louis Dumont:

“Thus at first sight, following most of the literature, the regulation of marriage is an expression of the principle of separation: castes separate themselves from one another by prohibiting marriage outside the group, just as they forbid contact and commensality between persons belonging to different groups.” (*Homo Hierarchicus*, p. 151)

This very important rule of the caste system is still very strong. Interestingly enough, not only among Hindus: it seems that also Muslims and Christians have adjusted to this custom quite nicely in spite of their well preached but little practiced ideals of equality and brotherhood.

From time to time it happens that purer caste people agree to set up marriage relationship with not so pure caste people. Usually, in these cases, a girl from the purer caste is given to a not so pure caste and in most of the cases there is something wrong with the girl.

Some years ago, a few cases like this happened in the Borodol parish, which is under the Catholic Diocese of Khulna. The Christian people of this parish come from an out caste background: the Rishi group. A few girls from Shelabunia parish (whose members are from the Nomosudra group, a purer caste) were married to Borodol men. When asked how that had been possible we were told that those girls were 'pocha mal' (rotten stuff). The Christian Rishis of Borodol were a suitable trash bin in which to throw the rubbish from Shelabunia parish.

Even though the concept of endogamous marriages is still the practiced norm and is prevalent, gradually things are changing in this area, especially among educated young people. These intercaste marriages are usually love marriages and follow the Western fashion. Once intercaste marriages become standard practice, it would seem that the caste system would collapse. Only time will tell.

**Prohibition of interdining or commensality.** The caste system prevents high caste people from sharing food and water with low caste people. The reason behind this prohibition is the same demeaning, irrational idea of purity and pollution. Prohibition of commensality very often goes together with other social restrictions such as prohibition of approaching high caste people, entering their houses, having access to public places such as tea stalls, restaurants, hair dresser's shops etc. In villages situated in the south-western part of Bangladesh many Untouchables to this day suffer from this kind of discrimination. They are not allowed to have a cup of tea in the bazaars or have their haircut in the local barbers' shops. The Rishis (a group of these Untouchables living in the area) have started protesting against this kind of discrimination and every year on the 10<sup>th</sup> of December on the occasion of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Rishis organize a rally to remind the touchable groups that time for ending oppressive discrimination has come.

Even though many reports on Human Rights have been issued, reporting diplomats should visit rural Bangladesh and inquire a little bit about the way village out caste people are still offended in their human dignity.

Even presently, very few people eat with the out caste – untouchable people in the villages of rural Bangladesh. Twenty years ago when we went to live among the Rishis of Chuknagar village under the P. S. of Dumuria-Khulna we were the only human beings who would agree to eat with this group of impure people. When the higher castes tried to find an explanation as to why these well educated and rich foreigners would eat with such dirty, impure people somebody suggested that in the foreigners' own country they belonged to the same stock: that they must be Rishis, too!

Out caste people are always alert with this last feature of the caste system and they are quite smart in testing their guests' behaviour. For example, when out castes have somebody visiting their villages, they offer him/her coconut water. Before serving the

coconut water, they ask the visitor if he/she wants to drink the water out of a glass or from the coconut. They realize that their guest may not be free from caste prejudices. If the guest prefers to drink the water out of the coconut instead of the glass that indicates the guest feels the inhabitants of the village are impure since the coconut has never touched anybody's mouth !

It is sufficient to say that caste will be eliminated when high caste people agree to accept food from low caste people. Giving food is not important but accepting food is the clear sign of breaking down the walls of separation.

Jesus Christ eating with sinners and people considered impure by the Jews should be the model to be imitated at least by all the Christian people of the subcontinent who are still affected by casteism.

There was another feature of the caste system, which died out in the last century: that was the prohibition of crossing the ocean. According to the Hindu lawgivers the reason behind this rule was that by mixing with other peoples and other cultures it would not have been possible to stick to orthodox caste behavior. Up until the last century, this travel restriction was enforced. However, a few brave souls left their countries and faced the punishment inflicted on them. For example, the great poet Michael Modhu Shudhon Dutta's family and caste excommunicated him because he had changed religions and gone to England. Mahatma Gandhi had serious problems, too, because of his journey and stay in England.

Among the best Bengali writers and thinkers of this century we find Pramatha Choudhuri whose essays are full of practical wisdom but unfortunately are almost completely ignored by Bangladeshi educators. In one of his short essays titled "*Amra o Tomra*" (We and You), this writer listed the main differences between Indian and European people. About caste he wrote this: "*We (Indian people) loose caste if we cross the ocean.... you (European people) loose caste if you do not cross the ocean.*"

From this short analysis of the main features of the caste system it should already be obvious that this evil institution creates a myriad of obstacles and hindrances for human development which will be studied in depth in another chapter.

In concluding this chapter, I would like to signal a very important article, which appeared in *Jnanadeepa* (*Pune Journal of Religious Studies*-Volume 2- No.2-July 1999). The title of the article is "*Hierarchy, Equality and Liberation: Some Reflections on Indian Culture*" by George Karuvelil, S.J. The writer of that article says that in the culture of the Indian Subcontinent the concept of person is very underdeveloped, if not totally missing. The most important concept of Indian sociology is not human person but caste. Indian Christians should play a major role in promoting a culture of human person.

So from this perspective, a realistic evaluation of the various services offered to society by the Christian community (and Foreign Missions as well!) should be conducted. Which means that we will have to study the Virgin Mary's Magnificat and think of some kind of a counter culture!

# CHAPTER 4

## FROM VARNA TO JATI

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The four classical castes (varnas) are repeatedly mentioned in the Hindu Scriptures. At this point in the study it may be useful to briefly list the most important Hindu Scriptures where the four ‘varnas’ are mentioned. For those desiring further information, a wealth of research exists on this topic. For the sake of brevity, a summary of what the following Hindu Scriptures say about the four classical castes (varnas) is presented.

### 1 - Rig Veda

This is the first sacred book of the Hindus. In this book we find the “*Purusha Sukta*” or Hymn of Man which talks about the creation of animate life and society. A Primal Man, whose origin is unexplained in the text, is sacrificed to the gods and all of life, including the orders of society, comes into existence.

This is what the Hymn of Man says:

“When they divided Purusha, in how many different portions did they divide him? What became of his mouth, what of his two arms? What were his two thighs and his two feet called? His mouth became the Brahman: his two arms were made into the Rajanya: His two thighs the Vaishyas: from his two feet the Sudra was born.” (RV X. 90:11-12).

This is the mythic origin of the four classic castes or ‘varnas’.

### 2 - Mahabharata

This great epic poem very often emphasizes the harmony of a social hierarchical structure where each is aware of the boundaries of his duties and obligations. Just a few sentences (passim) are quoted:

“Those duties, which belong exclusively to Brahmins, I shall now tell thee: Self restraint has been declared to be the first duty of the Brahman. Study of the Vedas and patience in undergoing austerities. By practicing these two all their acts are accomplished.

A Kshatriya should protect the people. Always exerting himself for the destruction of robbers and wicked people he should put forth his prowess in battle.

A Vaishya should acquire wealth by fair means. With proper attention he should also protect and rear all domestic animals as a sire protecting his sons.

The Creator intended the Shudra to become the servant of the other three orders. By such service of the other three orders a Shudra may obtain great happiness. He should wait upon the three other orders according to their order of seniority. A Shudra should never amass wealth. By this he would incur sin. Shudras should certainly be maintained by the three other orders. Worn out umbrellas, turbans, beds and seats, shoes and fans should be given to the Shudra servants. Torn



clothes, which are no longer fit for wear should be given away by the regenerate classes unto the Shudra.” (*Mahabharata* XII, 60, *passim*)

### 3 - Bhagavad Gita

The most famous book of Hinduism also sanctifies the caste system. The Lord Krishna says to Arjuna:

“The fourfold caste system was created by me, by differentiating people according to their ‘guna’ and ‘karma.’”(IV.13)

“It is better to follow one’s own ‘dharma’ (duties of his/her own caste), righteously established, even with all its blemishes, than the dharma of others even when it is more attractive. It is better to die doing one’s own dharma...the dharma of others is terrible to follow.” (III, 35)

Always according to the Bhagavad Gita this is the consequence of failing to follow one’s caste obligation (dharma):

“When a family decays the immemorial religious laws of that family are destroyed. When the religious laws of the family are destroyed then lawlessness destroys the whole family. Because lawlessness prevails the women of the family become corrupt and when women are corrupt intermingling of caste follows. Intermingling of caste leads to hell both those who destroy the family as well the family itself.” (I: 40-42)

### 4 - Manu Smriti (Manu Sanghita – Dharma Shastra)

We have already mentioned this book which may be defined as the manual of the caste system among the books of the Hindu Scriptures. From the beginning to the end it gives detailed descriptions of the duties of each caste and prescribes penalties for the transgression of the customary laws. Here are a few quotations:

“For the sake of the prosperity of the worlds he (the Lord) created the Brahman, the Kshatriya, the Vaishya, and the Shudra to proceed from his mouth, his arms, his thighs and his feet. To Brahmins he assigned teaching and studying the Vedas, sacrificing for their own benefit and for others. The Kshatriya he commanded to protect people. The Vaishya to tend cattle to trade, to lend money and to cultivate land. One occupation only the Lord prescribed to the Shudra: to serve meekly these three castes.” (Manu Smriti I and X, *passim*)

From all the quotations we have drawn from the above mentioned Hindu Scriptures these observations may be made:

Throughout the Hindu Scriptures description, duties, rules and regulations of the four classical castes (varnas) are always the same. Nowhere does the slightest change or contradiction appear. Starting from the most ancient book of the Hindu Scriptures (the Rig Veda) to the latest one (the Bhagavad Gita), Hindu lawgivers never altered anything.

Since the same ideas about the four castes (varnas) are stressed again and again and in the same way in all of the most important Hindu Scriptures, it appears that the caste system is a social system with a very deep religious foundation. The Lord

Krishna speaking to Arjuna clearly says that he created the system. In this regard the other Scriptures are very clear as well.

This religious foundation could be one of the main reasons as to why the system was able to survive for ages and even nowadays is still so strong. With reference again to the resolutions pronounced by the World Hindu Conference in Katmandu in 1988, one of the resolutions stated that much harm has been done to Hinduism because of the caste system and untouchability yet nothing was said about the Scriptures which are the religious foundation of these two evil institutions. Those who are busy with inter-religious dialogue should ask Hindu pandits what they propose to do with those pages of their Scriptures which deal with the caste system if Hinduism decides to abolish it: will the pages referencing the caste system be torn out or burned or just declared invalid? Hinduism is full of puzzles!

This chapter has only dealt with the four main castes yet anyone familiar with Hinduism realizes it is almost impossible to list all the various castes. How did it happen that from four main castes (varnas) so many other castes (jatis) were born? Actually, caste in the singular number is not a reality. Castes exist only in the plural number. There is no such thing as a caste: there are numerous castes. How did they come into existence? There are many theories, which try to answer this question, but so far none of them can be said to be the definitive answer.

A list and brief explanation of the main theories explaining the formation of many castes will be presented next.

**1 - Varna theory:** this theory goes back to the time of the so called 'Indo-European history' according to which anywhere from 2000 to 2500 years ago BC a group of nomadic people called Aryans (from the Sanskrit word meaning noble) lived somewhere between Asia and Europe. They moved from their lands and gradually occupied the entire Europe and Northern part of India.

The Aryans who came to India had to fight against its inhabitants called Dravidians who were of a completely different culture. The Dravidians also had a different complexion: the color of their skin was black and the Aryans were white skinned. That was a very important matter, which was probably at the root of the varna system. The word 'varna' has many meanings: one of them is 'color'. The white skinned Aryans tried to distinguish themselves from the non-Aryans (Dravidians) in regard to color. The class or group who retained the utmost purity of color by avoiding intermixture naturally gained precedence in the social scale.

The Indo-Aryans already were divided into three orders or varnas or castes (probably priests, soldiers, and commoners) and they had no reservations about intermixing among themselves. However, racial hatred made them avoid contact with the Dravidians who were black skinned. The Dravidians were gradually turned into the fourth caste: the Shudras whose main duty became service to the three white skinned Aryan groups.

So, the Varna theory would suggest that development of intercaste restrictions was principally due to a racial difference between the white Aryans conquerors and the black natives and the desire of the former to preserve their purity of blood. Those who did not care about purity of blood would just set up new groups, which would turn into

new castes (this leads into another theory, called Manu's theory, which will be discussed later).

Sadly, the emphasis and importance of skin color continues through the present for Bengali people no matter to which caste, class, and religion they belong. For Bengalis, darker is ugly and lighter is beautiful. Parents with darker skinned daughters will have difficulties in arranging marriages for these daughters. A few years ago there was even a very popular song, which said that nobody wants to marry a dark complexioned girl. In this regard, a survey among Bangladeshi nuns would be very interesting. In many convents, plain looking nuns with darker skin may be seen. Who can say these girls were really called by God to religious life? Most probably their parents could not marry them off so easily so they were encouraged to become nuns. They are the victims of centuries of color discrimination and found a way to "escape" through grasping onto a religion promoting equality, at least in words.

The varna theory which could also be called the 'Indo European' theory, received validation by German Indologists who were able to discover striking similarities between people of Europe and people of North India. The striking similarities are visible at these three levels:

- complexion
- languages
- religion

European and North Indian people have the same anthropometric features and very often high caste Hindus are as white skinned as European people.

Besides similar physical features, very clear connections may be identified between European languages and the languages of North India. Those who are interested in discovering the striking similarities between the so-called 'Indo European' languages can have a look at the old editions of the "*Webster Dictionary*". Towards the end of this dictionary there is a section which shows the similarity of words roots in the main languages which were born from Sanskrit.

Also, many gods and goddesses described in the Vedas, the old Scriptures of the Aryans, are very similar to the gods and goddesses of Greek and Latin mythology. All these striking similarities are not coincidental so historians have developed the "Indo-European" theory which may be further studied in any book of Indian History.

Those who would like to deepen their knowledge on this matter should refer to two wonderful books written by a renowned Indian scholar: Nirad C. Chaudhuri. The names of the books are "*The Continent of Circe*" and "*Hinduism*". Another valuable resource is the works written by Max Muller. Muller is the most famous German Indologist scholar who discovered all those striking similarities between North Indian and European people, language and Greek and Latin mythology.

**2 - Manu's theory:** reference has already been made to Manu, the mythical lawgiver of Hinduism, who is allegedly the writer of that infamous book called '*Manu Smriti*' or '*Manab Dharma Shastra*'.

According to Manu, as previously explained, the four original varnas were created from the mouth, arms, thighs and feet respectively of Brahma (the Lord). Subsequently, many castes or jatis were produced by a series of interbreeding between members of the

four varnas and then between the descendants of these initial unions. Secondly many castes were formed by degradation from the original varnas on account of non observance of sacred rites. Manu's views are neither stupid nor nonsensical.

Since the law of endogamy is a very important feature of the caste system those who do not take it seriously are excommunicated from their own castes. Excommunication means social death. Those who encounter these serious troubles either have to seek shelter in a lower caste or form a new caste on their own. Even today, love marriages are rare and young boys and girls who get married against their groups' leaders' approval or consent very often have to face dire consequences.

**3 - Occupational basis of caste.** This is another theory to explain the existence of so many 'jatis'. The champion of this theory is Nesfield who maintained that occupation is the chief cause of caste. He excluded all influence of race from the origin and growth of the system. According to this theory, different occupations grouped together men from different tribes into guild castes, who then borrowed the principles of endogamy and prohibition of commensality and thereby solidified themselves into isolated units.

The ranking of the various castes as high or low depends upon whether the industry represented by a specific caste belongs to an advanced or backward stage of culture. Thus, the castes following the most primitive occupations like hunting, fishing, basket making etc. are regarded as the lowest while metal workers, agriculturists and traders are higher in rank. The highest castes are those of priests and teachers and military people. This theory takes its divisions from the main four groups present in all societies of the world:

- religious power
- military power
- economic power
- servants

Of course, the occupational theory is not accepted at all by those who strongly believe in purity and pollution as one of the most dominant aspects of Hinduism.

**4 - Purity and Pollution theory.** We have already talked about purity and pollution as one of the main features of the caste system. According to this theory, members who had been polluted or who were impure formed jatis. Pollution may come from:

- events: such as birth-menstruation-sexual intercourse-death
- contact with dirty things
- contact with people considered impure

All those who had something to do with polluting matters were kept as members of low castes or out castes. Midwives, scavengers, barbers, washermen, cobblers, sweepers etc. are people who even today are kept at a very low level on the social ladder because of their interaction with what are still perceived to be pollutants.

**5 - Risley's theories.** This famous English anthropologist observed several processes by which castes are formed. His theories are summarized below:

- *Conversion*: a whole tribe of aborigines or a large section of a tribe enroll themselves in the ranks of Hinduism either under their own tribal designation or under a new caste name which can be easily distinguished from those of the standard castes.

- *Subdivision of castes for occupational reasons*: for example, the Mochis are a subdivision (or a subcaste) of the Chamars. Skinning of dead animals was the traditional occupation of the Chamars who would pass animal skins and hides to the Mochis who would clean them.
- *Religious reasons*: sects founded by social reformers or ‘gurus’ who espoused new teachings which would turn followers into new castes.
- *Migration*: if members of a caste leave their original habitat and settle permanently in another part of India the tendency is for them to be separated from the parent group and to develop into a distinct caste.
- *Castes formed by changes of customs*: the formation of new castes as a consequence of neglect of established customs or the adoption of new ceremonial practices seems to have been a common practice since the earliest times.

**6 - Tribal basis of caste.** This theory states that tribalism is a very important factor in the development of caste. According to this theory, the original inhabitants or Dravidians (aborigines) contributed more than the Aryans to the cultural tradition of caste or forming divisions. Aborigines were usually divided into a myriad of tribes, which did not intermarry and hated each other even when their languages sprang from the same root. This theory suggests that even before the coming of the Aryans, there had been great cultural differences among the natives of India: probably between the civilized Dravidians dwelling in towns and those living in forests, fishing, and hunting. These differences raised a wall of separation between the two groups and each avoided contact with the other. This division of the natives of India could not be eradicated by the Aryan conquerors and turned into caste divisions. The tribal theory finds strong support from the fact that caste rules are more rigid among the Dravidians of Southern India than among the Aryan peoples of Northern India. So, the conclusion reached by this theory is that the practices of the conquered aborigines contributed as much to the development of caste as the racial class prejudices of the Aryan conquerors.

**7 - Ambedkar’s theory:** Dr. Ambedkar has already been mentioned as one of the most important scholars who studied the caste system in depth. Dr. Ambedkar’s theory says that the passage from Varna to Jati happened because of the ‘infection of imitation’.

For Dr. Ambedkar, endogamy is the main pillar on which the entire caste system is based. The tradition of endogamy in the Hindu society originated from the Brahmin caste and was whole-heartedly imitated by all the non-Brahmin castes and subcastes which in turn became endogamous castes. The whole process of caste formation in India is a process of imitation of the higher castes by the lower castes. Those who were able to imitate Brahmins’ customs, habits and ceremonies were given a high rank in the social ladder. Those who were unable to imitate the Brahmins were given a low rank in the social hierarchical structure.

This theory about the infection of imitation should not be easily dismissed because it seems to get support both from people’s daily behavior and religious attitudes. Imitation seems to be an ingrained cultural behavior as it is difficult for Bangladeshi people to be creative. The tendency is to copy other people’s behavior. Imitation is rampant and examples may be identified throughout every area of life. For example, what about politics: is anything new coming out of ‘hartals’? And what about NGO activities in rural Bangladesh? Is there any NGO, which has set up new development projects for its beneficiaries? Imitation is easy: invention is difficult.

Social Indian anthropologists have studied another behavioral pattern which is visible among low caste people and has something to do with the infection of imitation: these low castes or at least certain sections of them try to change their status through a process which social scientists call 'sanskritization'. Through 'sanskritization,' the lower castes attempt to improve their status and rise up in the caste hierarchy by emulating the Brahmins and other ritually superior castes. This imitation-emulation may take different forms. A non-vegetarian lower caste might give up meat eating and adopt pure vegetarianism. A lower caste may give up alcoholism and certain social practices like child marriage, widow remarriage etc. imitating the Brahmins or a lower caste might seek the help of a Brahmin priest to officiate at rituals using Sanskritic (thus the word Sanskritization) formulas, mantras and prayers. This process does not change things substantially and leaves the hierarchical system unaltered but provides a reference model to the lower castes in their aspirations for status ascendancy.

**8 - Theory of excommunication.** This theory may offer the best and clearest explanation of the 'fissiparous' character of caste. Every caste has its own rules and regulations. The leaders of each caste are quite dedicated to ensuring that all members of the caste obey the rules. The leaders of the caste will not tolerate any innovation or deviation that seriously antagonizes the social code of that caste. Without much hesitation the leaders will excommunicate those who refuse to adhere the caste code. The penalty for sins against caste rules is excommunication. The sinner will be compelled to seek shelter in an inferior caste. If he is not able to find any caste willing to accept him, he will have to set up his own group, which will be turned into a new caste.

Pertaining to excommunication, Dr. Ambedkar says:

"When a person is expelled from his caste the penalty is uniform. His friends, relatives and fellowmen refuse to partake of his hospitality. He is not invited to entertainments in their houses. He can not obtain brides or bridegrooms for his children. Even his married daughters can not visit him without running the risk of being excluded from caste. His priest, his barber and washerman refuse to serve him. His fellow castemen sever their connection with him so completely that they refuse to assist him even at the funeral of a member of his household. In some cases the man excluded from caste is debarred access to public temples and to the cremation or burial ground." (*Writings and Speeches*, vol. 3: p. 143)

Excommunication from caste is still being enforced. Just one example happened in a village near Chuknagar. The head of the only Christian family in the village died. Since this family had dared to abandon the ancestral religion of Hinduism, which the other villagers still clung to, the Christian family was ostracized even to the grave. None of the other families of the village came forward to help the sons of the deceased to bury their father. The villagers would not even permit the Christian man's survivors to bury his body in the village. He was buried in the small graveyard at the Chuknagar Christian Mission. This incident is just one of many and represents how strong the feelings are when an individual or a single family dares to go against tradition.

This social death can be temporary or permanent. If permanent, a new caste will be likely to be born. If temporary, the sinner will have to go through a lot of ridiculous penances and after the expiation of his sins he may be re-admitted into the caste.

Those who are interested in getting some knowledge about these penances may refer to the following books:

- Baba Shaheb Ambedkar: "*Writings and Speeches*", vol. 3
- Abbè Dubois: "*Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*"
- L. S. S. O' Malley: "*Indian caste customs*"

Bengali literature relates many excommunication cases and the word "*ek ghore rakha*" (keep in isolation) is used for this harsh penalty.

**9 - Lack of political control.** This seems to be another reason behind the tendency of the caste system towards division. In India there was no political power which could draw the scattered groups or tribes together until the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC. This is what the famous Indian anthropologist G.S.Ghurye wrote in this regard:

"The lack of rigid unitary control of the State, the unwillingness of the rulers to enforce a uniform standard of law and custom, their readiness to recognize the varying customs of different groups as valid, and their usual practice of allowing things somehow to adjust themselves helped the fissiparous tendency of groups and fostered the spirit of solidarity and community feeling in every group. Both these circumstances conspired to encourage the formation of small groups based on petty distinctions." (*Caste and race in India*, p. 179)

**10 - The doctrine of Karma.** For sure this was (and still is) another reason which kept the caste system so strong throughout the centuries. The doctrine of metempsychosis assigns the work and status to every man according to the inexorable law of Karma, or action in his previous lives. In this way, even the most wretched man with his most degrading occupation remains satisfied with the belief that the miseries of his present life are the result of his sins in his previous life. The doctrine of Karma goes on by saying that if that man submissively performs his caste duties in this life he will be born in a higher caste in the next life. This is the so-called "*varnashramadharma*" theory of the Hindu Scriptures: every man's duty is to remain in his varna/caste. This theory might be thought of as the philosophical justification of the caste system.

Each of the above theories has some basis for being developed and justification for being adhered to. As Hinduism continues to be analyzed, it is certain that additional theories and/or combinations of theories will evolve. After this brief introduction to caste formation theories, it is hoped that the complexity of the topic is conveyed and that the reader will conduct further research on his/her own.

Before ending this chapter, a brief description about marriage customs, including treatment of widows, exhibited by Hindus to keep the caste system in place for centuries will be given. To be sure, there must be Scriptural foundations for these technical ways. However, the origins or basis for following these techniques will not be explained here.

The techniques for enforcing the caste system in regard to marriage and widows were (and sometimes still are) the following:

**1. Child marriage.** This was (and still is!) the first technique to enforce the caste system. Hindu legislation prescribed that a girl must be married before puberty. If a father did not marry off his daughter before puberty, this was considered to be a sin on the part of the father. The eighth year of age was considered the most appropriate time for a girl to be married. The child groom and the child bride would stay in their parents'

house until puberty time arrived and only then would they initiate sexual relationships. However, from the day of the ceremony, irregardless of consummation, the marriage was considered to be valid. Thus, if the boy died, the girl was considered a widow. In India, this custom of child marriages was abolished only in 1938 through "*The Child Marriage Restraint Act*" which set the age for marriage at 14 for girls and 18 for boys.

Contemporary Bangladeshi legislation, stipulates that the marriage age is 16 for girls and 18 for boys. However, rural villagers are either ignorant or unconcerned about this law. It is common to encounter girls barely thirteen being married to somewhat older boys.

Seventy years ago Katherine Mayo, an American writer, wrote a book, which became one of the most controversial books on Indian cultural practices. The name of the book is "Mother India". Although the book was written decades ago, many of the anecdotes seem to accurately describe what is still taking place in various rural areas of Bangladesh. To gain an idea about the negative repercussions caused by this terrible child marriage custom, the following chapters are recommended reading: "*Marbles and tops*", "*Early to marry and early to die*", "*Spades are spades*", "*The earthly god*", "*Wages of sin*", "*Mother India*".

**2. Marriage in any way.** This was the second technique through which the caste system was preserved. A girl could not remain unmarried: somehow she had to be 'chained' to somebody or something. If a suitable husband of the same caste could not be found (young or old, physically fit or crippled, etc.), then even a tree could become a substitute for a husband.

There are two Bengali films demonstrating this strange concept: *Sati* and *Antarjali Jatra*. The story of Sati is about a dumb girl who is married to a tree and ends her days under a branch of that tree which is uprooted during a storm. The story of Antarjali Jatra is about a young lady who is married to an old man who is almost near death. The poor girl knows that she is going to be burned with her husband but nobody is concerned about that. The only person who shows her a little bit of sympathy is the fellow who is in charge of the cremation ground.

These kinds of marriage matches, no matter the suitability or unsuitability of the groom, still are arranged in rural areas. For example, among the Rishis of Chuknagar about ten years ago an unlucky sixteen year old girl was forced to marry a sixty five year old man because of family arrangements. The couple produced two children before the old man's death. Of course, as a widow, the girl was not encouraged to remarry. So, she was given in marriage to someone four times her age, bore children at a young age, and then was destined to a lifetime of being on the fringes of her society with no economic means to support herself and her children. Now the Catholic Mission of Chuknagar has to look after both the children and their mother as her culture offers her no way to escape her life of being ostracized.

**3. Burning of the widow (Satidaha pratha).** This barbaric custom seems to have started in the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. This drastic practice was quite popular in Bengal. According to the Hindu scriptures a woman should only get married once. A widow could present a real danger for the caste system since she could break down the wall of her own caste and be tempted to engage in a love affair with somebody from another caste. In that case, caste intermixing would happen. In order to eliminate this danger, the widow was encouraged to throw herself into the fire where her dead husband's corpse



was burning so that she would burn with him. Only high caste people followed this horrific custom as they had more to loose as a result of interbreeding with lower or darker castes. The Father of modern India, Raja Ram Mohan Ray, played a vital role in the abolition of this custom which was officially prohibited by the British government in 1829. Like many other rules, words on paper do not necessarily mean change in behavior. Although abolished almost 200 years ago, from time to time, in remote Indian villages attempts at widow burning are still made.

For those who wish to see a reenactment of a widow burning, "*The Far Pavilions*" is just one movie that shows this inhumane custom.

**4. Enforced widowhood.** This was the fourth technique through which the caste system was enforced. If a widow could not be burned, every kind of preparations were made in order to make the poor lady as ugly as possible so that nobody would be attracted towards her. The famous book (which has already been referred to several times) clearly explains legislation in this regard. (see Manusmriti 5: 157-161)

According to this legislation, a widow must have a very poor diet and she must eat only once a day so that she may not feel strong sexual desires. She can not wear beautiful clothes, perfumes, or any other ornaments. She must cut her hair short and she must sleep on the floor. High caste widows even had to shave their heads. She is not allowed to take part in any social life and she must avoid contact with males. It is no wonder that very often widows chose of their own will to be burned with their husbands rather than lead the life of a humiliated prisoner. Nowadays, the condition of widows is not as bad as in the past but these superstitions have not been completely eradicated.

Since the Hindu Scriptures state a woman should get married only once, enforced widowhood has been imposed on women for centuries and is still going on in spite of social reformers' and governments' efforts to put an end to it. Among social reformers, the name of Vidya Shagar must be remembered. The first law in this regard was the "Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act" passed by the British Government in 1856. In spite of these laws in favor of widows' remarriage it is still not fully accepted culturally for a widow to remarry and she may feel a social stigma towards her.

Enforced widowhood even extended to children. As girls were married off at a young age, some inevitably became widows at a very tender age. These young females were treated in the same callous manner as if they were older widows. They were given the only options of burning with their dead husbands or being shut away from the world for the rest of their lives. Fortunately, social reformers saw the complete waste of human life in this practice and lobbied to change the cultural norms. One such reformer, **Pandita Ramabai**, was a great Indian lady who became famous at the end of the last century for her efforts to rehabilitate child widows. She was the first woman who learned Sanskrit from her father, a Brahmin.

Pandita Ramabai was born in 1858 and died in 1922 in the Indian province of Maharastra. The title 'Pandita' was given to her because of her knowledge of the Sanskrit language. As a Sanskrit scholar, she studied the position of women in the Hindu Scriptures. She became disappointed and disgusted to discover what Hindu legislation towards women was like.

During her two journeys (first to America and then to England) she discovered Christianity. This is what she wrote in her testimony:

“ After my visit to the Homes at Fulham, where I saw the work of mercy carried out by the Sisters of the Cross, I began to think that there was a real difference between Hinduism and Christianity. I asked the Sisters to tell me what it was that made the Christians care for, and reclaim the fallen women. The Sisters told me the story of Christ meeting the Samaritan woman and His wonderful discourse on the nature of true worship and explained it to me. They spoke of the infinite love of Christ for sinners. Christ did not despise them but came to save them. I had never heard or read anything like this in the religious books of the Hindus. I realized, after reading the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter of St. John’s Gospel, that Christ was truly the Divine Savior He claimed to be and none but He could transform and uplift the downtrodden womanhood of India and of every land.” (*A Testimony*, p. 19-20).

After Pandita’s conversion to Christianity she dedicated her life to the rehabilitation of child widows. In 1889, she founded the Sharada Sadan, an institution where such child widows could find refuge and receive training that would enable them to earn a living. Sharada Sadan was a strictly secular institution. Pandita Ramabai had given assurances to her Hindu supporters that the girls would not receive religious instruction. In order to support the institution for child widows, Pandita’s American friends sent her the money required for the buildings and 6000 dollars a year for the upkeep of the institution. After 10 years, Pandita returned to America to give her friends an account of the money received; to tell them how many child widows had been trained as teachers and nurses; and to relay how many had started institutions on their own. From that time forwards, she did not ask for any more regular support.

Pandita Ramabai was determined to put all her trust in God who alone was to be her support as evidenced by her words:

“I feel very happy since the Lord called me to step out in faith and I obeyed. To depend on Him for everything: for spiritual life, for bodily health, for advice, for food, water, clothing and all the other necessities of life- in short to realize by experiment that the promises of God in Philippians 4:6 and in other parts of the Holy Scriptures are true. I am spared all trouble and care casting my burden upon the Lord. There are over 1500 people living here. We are not rich, nor great, but we are happy, getting our daily bread directly from the loving hands of our Heavenly Father. Having no bank account anywhere, no income from any earthly source but depending altogether on our Father we have nothing to fear from anybody, nothing to lose and nothing to regret. The Lord is our Inexhaustible Treasure. We are confidently resting in His arms and He is loving and faithful in His dealings with us.” (*Testimony*, p. 3-4).

This extraordinary lady should inspire all the missionaries working in the Indian Subcontinent! Pandita Ramabai began life as a Brahmin but ended life as a child of God treating others as Christ urged and taught. She was able to break through her own cultural barriers to assist others in doing the same.

# CHAPTER 5

## THE BHUDEB: THE EARTHLY GOD

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The main pillars on which Hinduism is based are basically the following ones:

- the caste system (*Choturbornobebostha*)
- the duty of every Hindu to remain in his/her caste (*Varnashramadharma*)
- the supremacy of the Brahmins (*Brahmannobad*)

This chapter will deal with the Brahmins who have managed to keep the caste system alive for more than four thousand years. Because I have not had many dealings with the Brahmins, I am not writing from personal experiences in regard to the highest caste of Hindus.

One of the main missionary tasks of the subcontinent is to rescue the out castes and untouchables from the human-made hell to which Hinduism has condemned them. Everybody knows that this is not an easy task at all since centuries of behaviour must change and the entire power structure eliminated. The Brahmins and the caste system were able to subjugate the lower castes and untouchables. The reconstruction work, which is needed for these slaughtered lambs, is extremely painstaking. It is natural that those working with the out castes and untouchables vent their anger against the high castes who were and still are responsible for the uncountable miseries of many down trodden people living on the Indian Subcontinent. After working with the untouchables for twenty-five years, I view the Brahmins as the oppressors. Whether the Brahmins do this consciously or unconsciously, the results are the same: the untouchables believe they are subhuman and accept without question whatever injustices are heaped upon them. Anger and resentment has built up inside of me over the years against the priests of Hinduism because of the hell they have condemned millions of out caste-untouchables to live in for the rest of their lives.

Whenever I go to Calcutta, I visit the famous place where Mother Theresa started her work many years ago. A visit to this area offers a startling contrast between a Hindu Temple and Nirmal Ridoie, the Missionaries of Charity's Home for the Destitute and Dying. Within meters, one is able to observe the main difference between Christianity and Hinduism.

In the temple of the goddess Khali one can see dozens of Brahmins extremely busy with their financial matters. Whenever they see a white skinned tourist they literally jump on him/her to try their best to get as much money as they can from his/her pockets. A Brahmin will volunteer to guard the tourist's shoes. Another one will volunteer to be a tourist guide and will show the tourist around the shrines in which the statues of the various gods and goddesses are placed. In every shrine a plump, greedy Brahmin is busy collecting offerings brought by the pilgrims and the devotees. When the tour is finished a group of the same fat, money-hungry Brahmins will accost the poor tourist with a book in their hands to request a donation for the poor who every day

are fed in the temple of the goddess. If the tourist does not agree to give anything, the group of plump Brahmins show their anger and disappointment in an obvious manner. As the tourist leaves the temple, he or she is made to feel obligated to pay for the services provided “voluntarily.” Once the tourist succumbs to pressure to give a “donation,” to the shoe keeper Brahmin and the tour guide Brahmin, often initially the two refuse to accept the amount so that they might demand a larger sum. After a visit to this holy temple, one has the impression of having encountered a gang of robbers and thieves.

Near the Hindu temple is the famous Nirmal Ridoi where Mother Theresa started her missionary work. The human rubbish from Calcutta is brought here and looked after with tender and loving care. Mother Theresa’s smiling sisters, who take care of people waiting for death, certainly are not there to pursue their own financial interests. In that place one witnesses grace in action: the main feature of Christianity that most other major religions do not offer. What a difference between the smiling sisters wearing white saris and the greedy Brahmins!

What gives the Brahmins the rights and privileges to act as they do? A few quotes from the following people might offer some explanation.

Baba Shaheb Ambedkar: “The philosophy of Hinduism does not answer the test either of utility to society or of justice to the individual because the religious ideal of Hinduism for divine governance of human society is an ideal which falls into a separate class by itself. The center of the ideal is neither individual nor society. It is a class - the class of Supermen called Brahmins. Hinduism is the gospel of the Superman and it teaches that what is right for the superman is the only thing, which is called morally right and morally good. Hinduism is not interested in the common man. Hinduism is not interested in Society as a whole. The center of its interest lies in a class and its philosophy is concerned in sustaining and supporting the rights of that class. In the philosophy of Hinduism the interests of the common man as well as of society are denied, suppressed and sacrificed to the interest of this class of Supermen.

Such is the philosophy of Hinduism: it is the Superman’s heaven and the common man’s damnation.” (*Writings and Speeches*, vol. 3: p. 72, 74, 76, 78)

According to that infamous book, the *Manu Smriti*, the Brahmin or the Superman is entitled to every kind of privilege such as:

- he can not be punished even if he commits the most horrible crimes...
- he can have as many sexual affairs as he wants even with low caste women...
- his property is exempt from taxation...

“The privileges of the Superman are not at all counterbalanced by an obligation towards the common man. Indeed the Superman has no duty towards the common man. He is not bound to do charity for the uplift of the common man. To the common man (Sudra) who is born to serve him the Superman is not at all required to be a good employer and he is not bound to keep him well-fed, well clothed and well housed. The rise of the common man is antagonistic to the supremacy of the Superman. In order to keep the Superman satisfied, happy and secure the Hindu social order takes special care to keep the common man in a state of perpetual degradation. The common man has no right to life, liberty, property or pursuit of happiness. He must be ready to sacrifice everything for the sustenance of the life and dignity of the Superman. The Hindu social or-

der prescribes that such sacrifice should be made willingly by the common man. Indeed it inculcates that the common man should respond to such call for sacrifice in the interest of the Superman as his supreme duty. The Superman will not tolerate the Sudra to have the comfort of a high sounding name. He must be contemptible both in fact and in name.” (Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, vol. 3: Pages 121-123)

Sattyajt Ray has been able to show this master-slave relationship between the Brahmin and the common man (the Sudra and the Untouchables) in *Satgati* (Deliverance), that moving short Hindi film mentioned in chapter three.

The following few paragraphs are excerpted from the classic book on Hinduism written almost 200 by the famous French missionary **Abbè J. A. Dubois**, one of the most famous researchers on the caste system. A prefatory note to the book written by the most famous Indologist Max Muller says: “As the Abbè went to India as a missionary and was a man remarkably free from theological prejudices, missionaries in particular will read his volume with interest and real advantage.”

The main part of the book deals with the life style of the Brahmins and it quite evident that the writer does not show great sympathy towards them. Here are a few paragraphs describing the character and nature of the *bhudeb* or “earthly gods.”

“ Are the Brahmins really so devoted to the religion of their country and to the worship of those deities? Well! Though this assertion may appear paradoxical I should say that of all Hindus they care the least and have the smallest amount of faith in them. There is a well-known Hindu proverb which says: ‘ A temple mouse fears not the gods.’ This exactly applies to the Brahmins who enter the temples without showing the slightest sign of serious thought or respect for the divinities who are enshrined in them. Even while performing their numerous religious fooleries their behaviour shows no indication of fervour or real devotion. As a matter of fact their religious devotion increases or diminishes in proportion of the amount of profit they expect to make out of it.” (*Hindu manners*, p. 295-296)

“Naturally cunning, wily, double tongued and servile they turn these most undesirable qualities to account by insinuating themselves everywhere. They occupy the highest and most lucrative posts in the different administrative boards and Government offices as well as in the judicial courts of the various districts. In fact there is no branch of public administration in which they have not made themselves indispensable. As arch-impostors they are absolutely unrivaled. Every Hindu is an adept at disguising the truth but on this point the Brahmin far excels every other caste. Then again, flattery, in the art of which Brahmins are masters, is also a great source of profit to them. However proud and haughty they may be they never find any difficulty in groveling in the most humiliating manner at the feet of any one form whom they think they can gain some advantage. But the most inexhaustible mine of wealth to Brahmins is their religion. As chief priests they exercise the highest functions and consequently derive almost all the profit.” (id. p. 289-291, 294, 295)

Abbè Dubois goes on and on listing the vices of the Brahmins. What he says about their gluttony habits is quite humorous:

“Gluttony may certainly be included among the numerous vices of the Brahmins. There is no limit to their appetite when they get the opportunity of indulging it and such opportunities frequently occur seeing that their numberless ceremonies always end with a feast. If Brahmins can with a certain amount of justice reproach Europeans for intemperance in drinking with no less justice can Europeans retort that Brahmins show great want of moderation in eating. Besides, drunkenness is not an habitual vice among respectable Europeans and those who frequently give way to it are looked upon with contempt by their countrymen: whereas Brahmins who are the cream of Hindu society and the ‘gods on earth’ are perfect slaves to their stomachs. Indeed the most revolting gluttony does not horrify them and they even justify it under the cloak of religion. It is by no means uncommon for them to gorge themselves to such repletion that they are unable to rise from the place where they have been eating.” (id. p. 272-273).

Now a few quotations from **St. Francis Xavier**’s letters about the Brahmins:

“Hay en estas partes ,entre los gentiles ,una generacion que se llaman Brahmanes: estos sustentan toda la gentilidad. Tienen cargo de las casas donde estan los idolos: es la gente mas perversa del mundo. De estos se entiende el salmo que dice: ‘De la gente no santa, del hombre inicuo y fraudulento, librame. Es gente que nunca dice verdad y siempre piensan como han de sutilmente mentir y enganar los pobres, sencillos y ignorantes, diciendo que los idolos demandan que les llevan a ofrecer ciertas cosas y estas non son otras sino las que los Brahmanes fingen y quieren para mantener sus mujeres, hijos y casas. Son estos Brahmanes hombres de pocas letras y lo que les falta en virtud tienen de iniquidad y maldad en grande aumento. A los Brahmanes de esta Costa donde ando pesales mucho que yo nunca otra cosa hago sino descubrir sus maldades. Ellos me confiesan la verdada cuando estamos a solas de como enganan el pueblo: confiesanme en secreto que no tienen otro patrimonio sino aquellos idolos de piedra de lo cuales viven fingiendo mentiras.” (*Cartas y escritos de San Francisco Javier*, p. 112-113)

This is what **Catherine Mayo** wrote about the Brahman in her famous book “*Mother India*”:

“With one of these low caste men become rich, respected and politically powerful, I sat in private conference, in the city of Madras.

“Will you draw me your picture of the Brahman?” I asked.

He answered – and these are his actual words, written down at the moment:

“Once upon a time, when all men lived according to their choice, the Brahman was the only fellow who applied himself to learning. Then, having become learned, and being by nature subtle minded, he secretly laid hold upon the sacred books and secretly wrote into those books false texts that declared him, the Brahman, to be the lord over all the people. And gradually, because the Brahman only could read and because he gave out his false texts that forbade learning to others, the people grew to believe him the Earthly God he called himself and to obey him accordingly. So in all Hindu India he ruled the spirit of man and none dared dispute him not till England came with schools for all..... Each Hindu in India pays to the Brahman many times more than he pays to the State. From the day of his birth to the day of his death a man must be feeding the Earthly God many more the Brahman calls his vested rights made so by religious law. Whoever neglects them goes to eternal damnation. The Brahman is indolent, produces nothing and takes to no calling but

that of lawyer or Government official. In this Province he numbers one and a half million and the rest of us, over forty one millions, feed him. When a child is born the Brahman must be paid. Otherwise the child will not prosper. Sixteen days afterward to be cleansed from pollution the Brahman must be paid. A little later the child must be named and the Brahman must be paid. In the third month the baby's hair must be clipped and the Brahman must be paid. In the sixth month we begin to feed the child solids and the Brahman must be paid. When the child begins to walk the Brahman must be paid. All such ceremonies and." (Mother India: pages 177-179)

These quotations show that the earthly gods of Hinduism are responsible for so many evil things still very much alive and active in the Indian Subcontinent.

**Nirad Chaudhuri**, one of the most controversial Indian writers, has said in his famous book "*Continent of Circe*" that the peoples of the Indian Subcontinent are intoxicated with these three things: riches, sex, religion. In his study of Hinduism the same writer has written that this religion has been able to give protection and a sense of security to the common man and at the same time has offered all the opportunities to the 'lords' for gaining and asserting power. How were the 'earthly gods' able to amass so much power and become 'Supermen'? From the ancient Scriptures (*Arannika* and *Brahmannya*) which deal mainly with the highest castes, it appears that power came into the hands of the '*bhudeb*' through the following ways:

- sacrifice
- mantra
- magic atmosphere
- asceticism

- The Brahman performs sacrifices to gods and goddesses. As a sacrificer, he becomes a mediator between men and gods. Somehow he becomes a sacred person endowed with divine powers.

- The Brahman knows the mantras. The gods and goddesses obey the mantras and work accordingly. Therefore the Brahman is greater than the gods. He is the '*bhudeb*', the earthly god. A Brahman does not bow his head in front of gods' images and statues.

- Very often in order to reach such a position of authority the Brahman has to acquire a reputation for possessing occult power. Of course, his supernatural powers are only magic tricks to be employed against the ignorant "vulgus profanum".

-Asceticism and renunciation also have been used by the '*bhudeb*' as a method of obtaining power over common people. Self-mortification has always been so effective among the Hindus that even Mahatma Gandhi felt compelled to bring it into politics in order to obtain mass support for the nationalist movement.

The '*bhudeb*' is superior to every human being, including kings! According to the ancient Scriptures, a king had the following duties towards a Brahman:

- servile speech
- washing his feet
- clothing him
- feeding him
- providing him with women to quench the burning blazing fire of his sexual organs

Not only has Brahmanism been destructive in the geographical areas traditionally known to be Hindu, but the perverse thinking spread to other places such as Europe as well! Most probably not everybody is aware of the fact that Brahminism had a strong influence on German Nazism. The German philosophers of the last century borrowed heavily from brahminical literature. Schopenhauer was obsessed with the ‘hidden treasure’ of brahminical thought. His enthusiasm for the Upanishads (the philosophical Hindu Scriptures) knew no bounds.

Friederick Nietzsche’s idea of the ‘Superman’ came to him from the Hindu Brahmins. Nietzsche had nothing but praise for the caste system and the superiority of a master caste (the Brahmins) over all the other castes.

The most famous Indologists are German. **Max Muller** is the greatest among them. Though he never visited India he translated the entire Sanskrit literature (Sacred Books of the East) into English. Goethe attempted to study the Gita which was welcomed with great enthusiasm in Germany and tried to master the Devanagari script (Sanskrit alphabet). To sum up, many 19<sup>th</sup> century German writers, philosophers and thinkers found some kind of mysterious affinity between the German and the Indian mind. Sanskrit was even taught in German schools.

Hindu Brahmins who declared that the gods had sent Hitler to re-establish their ‘*sanatana dharma*’ praised Hitler. Hitler’s emblem, the swastika, was borrowed from Brahmanism.

Among all those German thinkers and writers of the time influenced by the idea of a master caste, one German stood out because of his opposition to such ideas of racial superiority. The famous Nobel Laureate Doctor Albert Schweitzer was one of the few German philosophers who refused to be deceived by Brahmanism. He said that Brahminical literature was devoid of ethics. He condemned the Aryan theory, which assigned the superman status to Brahmins and inflicted apartheid on the Untouchables – out castes. He also said that Brahmins showed no interest in the higher development of the religion of the people. He pointed out the much publicized non-violence of the Hindus is not part of the Brahminic religion. In fact senseless killings and violence, which comprises the present day scene in India, has full religious sanction under Brahmanism.

Italian people will remember the killings of many innocent civilians by the hands of German SS soldiers during the Second World War at Le Fosse Ardeatine, a place at the outskirts of Rome. Giuseppe Dossetti, a famous Italian politician of that time who later became a monk, identified the reasons of the killings in the philosophy of the ‘superman-purity of blood-master race and slave race’ the German SS soldiers were imbued with. According to his research no other reasons could justify that massacre.

People should be aware that the insidious teachings of Brahmanism are as dangerous as ever in today’s modern India. A new term appears very often in newspapers and magazines: “*Hindutva*.” Behind this word there is a religious, cultural, and political movement that wants to make India a nation completely controlled by high caste Hindus. *Hindutva* is a mix of Brahminical Hinduism with nationalism, which reflects the interests of the Brahmins. The *Hindutva* forces seek to homogenize the culture of India into the upper caste of Sanskritic and Brahmanic Hinduism. Whatever is outside this cultural orbit is denied legitimate existence. According to the *Hindutva* movement,



Christianity and Islam are foreign bodies in Indian culture and civilization and as such should be eliminated from the holy Indian soil.

Later on we will talk about the founders of this Hindu fundamentalist movement. For the moment, discussion of Hedgevar and Golwalkar, leaders of Hindu movements follows.

Dr. Keshav Baliram **Hedgevar** (1883-1940) founded the famous Rashtrya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS) in 1925 whose vision is to establish a Hindu nation on the basis on one culture, one religion and one language. Linked to the RSS, in India there are several affiliated organizations (referred to in the RSS literature as the Sangh Pari-var) very busy in carrying out the programs and vision of *Hindutva* to establish a Hindu Rashtra (state) on the basis of a monolithic upper caste Sanskrit Brahminical Hinduism.

According to **Golwalkar**, a leader from the mid twentieth century, the Indian minorities should be wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation, claiming nothing, not even citizens' rights. It has been noticed that there are many striking similarities between the main ideas of Hindutva expressed by Golwalkar in his book "*Bunch of Thoughts*" and the main ideas of Nazism expressed by Hitler in his "*Mein Kampf*". A few of the similarities between Mein Kampf and Bunch of Thoughts are listed below:

- Nazism was a totalitarian, intolerant, and aggressive system, which would not permit another system to exist side by side with it. Golwalkarism believes that the ancient way of life - its customs, rites, beliefs and heroes - is the only legitimate way of life in India.
- Nazism believed that only the Aryan German people were the pure race and their community was to be governed by aristocratic principles. Race was the foundation of the State. Golwalkarism says that the Aryan Hindus (high caste and Brahmins) governed by the principles of the caste system are the Indian nation.
- Nazism had the strange idea that Jewish people would undermine the German civilization. Therefore, ideas like 'democracy', 'world solidarity', 'world peace' etc. would disintegrate German race consciousness. According to Golwalkarism Muslims and Christians are undermining the country. Ideas like 'equality', 'world unity', 'coexistence', 'unity', 'peace and non violence' damage the Hindu nation.
- As under Nazism, Jewish people and other minorities had no rights so Indian minorities such as Muslims and Christians have to submit themselves completely to Brahminical Hinduism. Under these circumstances, Muslims and Christians are supposed to accept Hindu culture as their own if they want to be considered Indians.

More than Islam, Christianity is considered by the Hindutva movement as the greatest enemy. Presently, in India, Christian missionaries are often attacked by the Hindu fundamentalists because their work among the downtrodden of the country goes against the interest of the upper castes and the Brahmins. That is a good sign for Chris-

tianity in India as it means social consciousness is being raised for the poorest of the poor!

Probably the time has come for Indian Christianity to make a very clear decision: either to follow the culture of the upper castes and the Brahmins or to get more and more involved in the problems of the out caste-Untouchables-Dalits, the down trodden of the Indian Subcontinent who have decided to distance themselves from the Sanskritic Hinduism of the Brahminic castes.

Finally, the downtrodden masses of India have awakened to their plight and are tired of the Brahminic '*varnavyavastha*.' Organized movements of the out castes and untouchables are beginning to unite to try their best to destroy the blind allegiance to the Brahmins. The oppressed are struggling to create a society based on the ideals of equality and social justice. The relevance of Christianity in India will depend on how the Church becomes a real community and partner to the downtrodden while witnessing and living the Fatherhood of God and brotherhood and sisterhood of humanity.

# CHAPTER 6

## 1. THE FIRST REVOLUTION AGAINST THE CASTE SYSTEM

## 2 THE FIRST HINDU COUNTER-REVOLUTION

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### 1. First revolution against caste system

Interestingly enough, every social, religious and cultural movement that took place in India since the Aryan invasion was essentially anti-Brahminical and involved some sort of protest against the caste system. Every leader who worked for social transformation identified the Brahmanic social order and the caste system as the principal enemy against which India should fight. This pattern of protest against the ruling caste has been in existence starting with the teachings of Buddha up until today's modern Dalit movement.

The first and the greatest social reformer India experienced was **Gautama Buddha**. The history of the sub-continent social reform begins with Buddha by taking into account his great achievements.

This chapter explores the topic of Buddhism, which might be considered **the first revolution against the Brahmanic social order and the caste system**. First, a brief description of the famous Hindu Scriptures called the Upanishads follows to give context to the times leading up to the introduction of Buddhism.

The Upanishads, along with the Gita, are the most famous and most important Hindu Scriptures. The Upanishads are philosophical books and were written between 800 and 400 B.C. Altogether there are more than 100 and they would make a book as huge as the Bible but there are only 12 or 13 sections considered to be important. They appeared in Europe at the beginning of the eighteenth century for the first time and both German and English Indologists expressed a deep interest in them. In these books we find a beautiful definition of God as "*Sat-Chit-Ananda*", which for modern day theologians could be one of the starting points for some kind of inter-religious dialogue between Hinduism and Christianity.

Oddly enough, in the Upanishads, a reaction against the supremacy of the Brahmins appears. This can be explained by the fact that the teachers and the philosophers of the Upanishads did not belong to the caste of the Brahmins but from the caste of the Ksattrya, the second caste. Very often the Brahmins admitted their ignorance and sought knowledge from the Ksattrya caste.

Gautama Buddha, the first and greatest social reformer of India, belonged to the Ksattrya caste so understandably he was influenced by his fellow scholars. Buddha's

life and teachings were not only a reaction but also the first true revolution against the Brahmanic social order and the caste system.

**Buddhism** was born in the sixth century B.C. That century is very important for human history and civilisation because altogether with the social and moral revolution of Buddhism in Asia we have the beginning of Greek philosophy in Europe and the religious revolution of Genesis 1-11.

Gautama Buddha's real name was Shiddharta. Gautama was the family name. Another name used for Buddha was "*Sakya Muni*", the Sage and Wise of the Sakya clan in which he was born in Northern India on the borders of Nepal in 563 B.C. Tradition says he was a prince and thus he received an education fit for a prince. Most probably, he was acquainted with the Upanishads. He married and had a son. Oppressed by the evils and misery of life he renounced the world at the age of 29 and left his home in search of truth and deliverance. In the Buddhist literature his leaving family life and the luxuries of the royal palace is called "*Moha teg*" or the great detachment.

After a few years of asceticism he formulated his own thoughts about a new kind of religion he called "*Sat Dhamma*" against the "*Sanatan Dharma*" of the Brahminical order. This new religion or way of life preached that the source of happiness was not enjoyment but detachment. In Bengali, the phrase "*Bhoge noe tage shuk*" denotes this concept.

Gautama (who became Buddha or the Enlightened) started preaching this new way of life at the age of 35, spreading his religion of *Sat Dhamma*. This led him to found and administer an order of monks which kept him busy until he died at the age of 80. In the Buddhist literature, he is described as one born in the world for the welfare, advantage and happiness of humanity. He preached a very high standard of moral life, which was unknown to the Hindu religion of his days.

As guidance for the ordinary man and woman, Buddha lay down some commandments known as the *Pancha Sila* or five precepts which are:

- Do not kill
- Do not steal
- Do not lie
- Do not be unchaste
- Do not drink intoxicants

For the monks, there were five additional precepts:

- Not to eat at forbidden times
- Not to dance, sing or attend exciting entertainment
- To abstain from the use of ornaments and scents
- To abstain from the use of high or broad beds
- Never to receive money

The *Pancha Sila* was the moral code, which was supposed to regulate the thoughts and actions of Buddhist society against the empty, useless and fruitless functions and ceremonies of the Hindu religion. Among the five "*sila*" the most important one was the edict in regard to not killing. Buddha took care to make it clear that the precept did not merely mean abstention from taking life. He insisted that the precept must be under-

stood to mean positive sympathy, good will and love for everything that breathes. In a word: non-violence! (*Ohinsha porom dhormo: in Bengali*). The principle of non-violence against any living beings was a great blow to Hinduism, which incorporated bloody sacrifices into the religious customs.

The Tathagatha (another name which Buddhist literature gives to the Enlightened One) strongly denounced and opposed the caste system. The ancient Pali sources repeatedly mention Buddha's reaction against the Brahmanic system.

It must be pointed out that the caste system in its present form did not exist then. The ban against inter-dining and inter-marriage had not become operative at that time. Things were more flexible than today and not as rigid. However, the principle of inequality, which is the basis of the caste system, had already become well established. Buddha fought strongly against this principle. Buddha attributed the origins of caste to ignorance, greed, pride and exploitation.

Buddha defined a true "out caste" as a murderer, an exploiter, a sacrificer of animals to the gods, a violent person, one who hates, one who is selfish and proud, and one who discriminates against people. He said that it is not by birth but by actions that one becomes a Brahmin or an "out caste."

Buddha felt that the *varna* (caste) was the reason for *Adharma* (decline of morality). Buddha's mission, like that of the "avatars" (godly incarnations) was to restore Dharma and to eliminate the evils of *varna* as practised by the small minded Brahmins. Practically speaking, in the matter of his opposition to the caste system, Buddha practised what he preached. He did what the Aryan-Hindu society refused to do. According to the Brahmanic order, the Shudra or low caste man could never become a Brahmin. Buddha admitted the Shudra or low caste man to the rank of *Bhikku*, the monk who held the same rank in Buddhism as the Brahmin did in Brahminism. Everybody could have access to the "*Sangha*", the monastic order. Buddha completely ignored all advantages or disadvantages arising from birth, occupation, gender, and social status and swept away all barriers and disabilities arising from ritual impurity or pollution.

In Buddhist literature there is a very important booklet called '*Dhammapada*' which is believed to faithfully report Buddha's 'ipsissima verba'. There is a chapter in this booklet about impurity. In this portion, we do not find any reference to impurity issuing from any human touch or from any association with different races. Rather impurity is the result of bad morality, irresponsibility, omission of '*swadharma*' (personal duties) and most of all ignorance. Buddha's thoughts were quite revolutionary to the already ingrained ideas of impurity and untouchability. Elsewhere, in Buddhist literature it is clearly stated that man's touch can not make another man pure or impure: "*By oneself, indeed, is evil done: by oneself is one injured. By oneself is evil left undone: by oneself is one purified. Purity and impurity belong to oneself. No one purifies another.*" (D. P., XII, 9)

The Buddha always preached unity between people and humanity as the only source of progress and prosperity. He had a very broad outlook for economic ethics. He insisted on the necessity of skills and ability without making distinctions between low

and high occupations. He taught that all occupations are great if the mind, the skill, and the dedication are great.

Buddha's '*dharma*' was oriented towards universality and inter-human relationships. He felt the same way towards each person, caste, and group. For him there were no high or low categories of people. He believed those who were mean-spirited and narrow-minded were really the lowly people due to their petty and discriminatory outlooks in life.

Yet, Buddha believed even narrow minded people could be brought up to a very high level of consciousness if they followed the moral path of the Sat Dharma: the Pancha Sila. This was just one more way Buddha threw off the chains of his ancestry as he did not fall into the Hindu trap of believing birth defines everything for an individual. Buddha understood that people could better themselves and rise above their birthly inheritance of senseless cultural customs.

Among Buddha's followers and members of his *Sangha* there were people from every caste and tribe. Buddha said. "*As the rivers have no names when they enter the ocean so it is of the Bikkus when they enter the Sangha.*"

As revolutionary as Buddha's thinking was towards the members of the various castes, he was equally revolutionary in his ideas about the equality of the sexes. Just as Buddha levelled up the position of the Shudras and the low caste men by admitting them into the Sangha so he levelled up the position of women. Just as a Shudra could become a Bikkhu so a woman could become a nun. Up until this time, women had not been given any glimmer of hope of being on an equal footing with men.

Another issue for which Buddha strongly fought was that of learning and education. According to the Brahmanic order only the three high castes could have access to education. With the idea that "knowledge is power," Brahmins insisted that the social order would be in danger if Shudras and women obtained knowledge. Buddha rejected this doctrine and taught that moral life begins with knowledge and ends with wisdom.

Constantly, the Enlightened One questioned the superiority of the Brahmins. The famous booklet "Dhammapada" has an entire chapter on Buddha's view of the real Brahman. Here are a few quotations that reflect Buddha's strong thoughts on this issue of what constitutes one truly worthy of respect:

'Not by matted hair, not by lineage, not by caste does one become Brahmin. He is a Brahmin in whom there are truth and righteousness'. (DP, XXVI, 393)

"I call a Brahmin whom who neither kills nor harms nor hurts any living being." (DP, XXVI, 405)

"I call a Brahmin whom who is free from anger, greed and lust and is respectful towards everybody." (DP, XXVI, 400)

## The Emperor Ashak

Most probably, the Brahmanic order did not realise how truly revolutionary Buddha's teachings were and what a great blow Hinduism would receive from Buddhism until Emperor Ashak appeared on the political scene of the Indian Subcontinent.

Indian history says that Ashaka, a son of Bindusara, the third sovereign of the Maurya dynasty, ascended the throne of Pataliputra (now Patna in Bihar) at the beginning of the third century B.C. and undertook the government of the Indian empire which he ruled for 40 years. Ashak followed Hinduism in his early days. However, the horrors of the Kalinga war (a place near modern Madras) made a deep impression on the heart of the victorious monarch. He joined Buddhism and he devoted himself to study, protect, practise, teach and spread the Law of Piety or Dharma. First, Ashak became a lay disciple of Buddha and then a monk and monarch at the same time.

Ashak preached and spread out Buddhist Dharma through inscriptions and edicts on rocks, monuments, and pillars (known as Rock and Pillar Edicts) placed in important cities, places of pilgrimage or frequented roads of his empire. The main points of emperor Ashak's preaching as it appears from those inscriptions are the following:

Respect for the sacredness of life:

"Here no animal may be slaughtered for sacrifice. Formerly in the kitchen of His Sacred and Gracious Majesty the King each day many hundreds of living creatures were slaughtered to make curries. But now, when this scripture of the Law is being written, only three living creatures are slaughtered for curry: to wit...two peacocks and one antelope-the antelope, however, not invariably. Even those three living creatures shall not be slaughtered in future." (1<sup>st</sup> Edict Pillar)

Moral life more important than empty ceremonies :

"Thus says His Sacred and Gracious Majesty the King: 'People perform various ceremonies.....that bear little fruit. The ceremonies of Piety bear great fruit. In it are included proper treatment of slaves and servants, honour to teachers, gentleness towards living creatures and liberality towards ascetics and Brahmins.'" (9<sup>th</sup> Edict Pillar)

The care taken to publish the imperial edicts by carving them in imperishable characters on rocks and monuments and pillars situated in great cities or main lines of communication or at sacred spots frequented by pilgrims implies that a knowledge of reading and writing was widely diffused. Some historians say that the uncountable monasteries and nunneries encouraged by Emperor Ashak fostered universal literacy and nunneries and they hypothesise that the percentage of literacy among the Buddhist population in Ashaka's time was higher than in British India's time!

The Buddhist literature gave emperor Ashak the title of "Dharma Raj." The first idea in human history of a 'Welfare State' came from him. He made whatever efforts were required for the welfare of people and undertook many works of public utility such as:

- planting trees on roads for shading and protecting people and animals
- planting mango groves
- sinking wells and building steps on river banks
- constructing rest houses
- establishing drinking places for people and cattle
- establishing medical treatment places for people and animals
- importing and planting medical herbs, roots and fruit trees

Ashak felt a universal paternal love towards all as stated in the second Kalinga Edict:

“All men are my children. Just as in the case of my own children I desire that all get welfare and happiness in this and the next world so do I also desire for all.”

Ashak felt indebted to all creatures and wanted to be able to reach out to all as he expressed in the Rock Edict 49:

“The reason for the little welfare work that I try to do is that I wish to discharge the debt that I owe to all creatures so that I may make some happy in this existence or help them attain ‘swarga’ (heaven) in the life hereafter.”

Although Emperor Ashak had a wide reaching impact on people, he is not mentioned in the Brahmanic literature of his time. Most probably the reasons for this omission are the following :

- the administration of his empire was carried out without Brahmins who always played a vital role in the royal or imperial business of India.
- the prohibition of blood sacrifices was so important for the Hindus and especially the Brahmins so Ashak’s decree for sanctity of life did not endear him to the Brahmins.
- Ashak’s egalitarian way of (“*Danda samata*’ and ‘*bebohar samata*” - same behaviour and same punishments) for the Brahmins as well as others (Edict Pillar VI) undermined the Brahmin’s power structure based on inequality.

The last great venture of this great Emperor was to spread the new Dharma of the Enlightened one to all the countries in Asia and also outside Asia. Because of his enthusiastic passion to change people’s way of thinking, the name of Ashak is known from the river Volga to Japan and from Vietnam to the Lake Baikal.

## 2. Manu smriti: the first hindu counter-revolution

Emperor Ashak gave Hinduism and particularly Brahminism the greatest blow by making Buddhism the religion of the state. The Brahmins lost all their prestige and were confined to a secondary position as long as Ashak’s dynasty lasted. Around 150 B.C. a Brahmin who proclaimed himself king was able to put an end to Emperor Ashak’s dynasty and tried his best to destroy the Buddhist state which was the cause of the degradation of the Brahmins.

The name of this king who rallied against the progress that Buddha, Ashak, and other enlightened ones made is recorded in Indian history as ‘Pushyamitra’. After Pushyamitra ascended the throne, the new King launched a violent campaign of persecution against Buddhism and made the Brahmins the sovereign rulers of India.

A famous book in which the Brahmin authors took revenge on Buddhism was written during Pushyamitra’s period. It can be considered the book, which fostered **the first Hindu-Brahmin counter-revolution**. The book has various names: *Manusmriti*, *Manusanghita*, *Manavadharmasastra*



In English, the title *Manusmriti* has been translated as: “The Laws of Manu.” Manu is alleged to be the ancestor of the human race or in other words the Indian Adam. “*Sriti*” designates a traditional sacred text among the Hindu Scriptures.

“*Sanghita*” stands for collection so *Manusanghita* is a collection of laws from Manu.

The word *Manavadharmasastra* can be explained by defining three words. “*Manava*” means “of the human race.” “*Dharma*” expresses the English ideas of religion, duty, law, or principle. “*Sastra*” can be translated as laws, teachings, or texts.

Whichever title is used, the Laws of Manu contain the main tenets of Hinduism more specifically defined than ever before: the caste system, the superiority of the Brahmins, the appropriate social relations between men and women of different castes, and of husbands and wives in the privacy of the home. It deals with all aspects of the culture such as birth, death, marriage, cosmogony, and rebirth.

No modern study of Hindu life, psychology, concepts of the body, sex, politics, money and material possessions, law, purification and pollution can ignore this book. The Laws of Manu was and still is the standard source of authority in the Hindu-Brahmin orthodox tradition. In the field of comparative law, the book has been considered as important as Hammurabi’s code and Moses’s laws.

This book became very famous among European Indologists. For example, Friedrich Nietzsche sang Manu’s praises and used the book as a stick to beat Christianity.

The Laws of Manu reflects a backlash against the non-violence of Buddhism, which had appealed to so many. It reflects the Hindu metaphor of the “law of the fish” (*matsonnay*) to express violence: the bigger fish eats the smaller one. It is the manual of the oppressive caste system. The Laws of Manu became the book, which the Untouchables of India hate most. It is the book, which was burned in 1925 by Dr. Ambedkar as a sign of his rejection of Hinduism and Brahmanism.

As previously stated, it is the book of the Hindu counter-revolution whose deeds or misdeeds were the following :

- it made the Brahmin a class of privileged persons
- it enforced the caste system
- it degraded the Sudras
- it enslaved women
- it marginalized the Untouchables

Let’s examine the misdeeds or mistruths of this counter-revolution one by one as stated in the Laws of Manu.

### **A - Superiority of the Brahmins**

The Brahmin is the Lord of the other castes :

- “On account of his pre-eminence, on account of the superiority of his origin, on account of his observance of particular restrictive rules and on account of his particular sanctification the Brahman is the Lord of all castes.” M.S., X.3-4)

- Manu states that the Brahmin has a right to become “Senapati”(Commander of forces), to conquer a kingdom and to become the ruler or Emperor of it. (M.S. XII. 100)
- The Brahmin enjoys the following immunities: freedom from taxation and exemption from kind of punishment for crimes. (M.S. VIII.123-124-379-380)
- Manu places the Brahmin above the ordinary penal law.
- The Brahmin receives material benefits in different ways: especially through “*dakshina*” and “*dan*”. *Dakshina* is the fee, which the Brahmin is entitled to charge when he is called to perform a religious ceremony. Since Brahminism is full of rites and ceremonies, it is not difficult to imagine how great must this source of income be to every Brahmin. The provision of “*dan*” (gifts) also makes a fruitful source of income. Everybody (especially kings) is supposed to flood the Brahmins with gifts.
- The Brahmin could take the property of the common man (the Shudra) without compensation.
- If a Brahmin discovered a hidden treasure he was free to appropriate the whole of it without giving a share to the king “since he was the lord of all” and was entitled to claim half of it if it was discovered by another.

By declaring they were the lords of all, the Brahmins separated and severed themselves from the different social strata of the non-Brahmin population in the name of religion. The Laws of Manu set up a privileged class with no checks and balances from any outside group. Both military and economic security were built into the laws to assure the Brahmins a privileged, safe, and pampered lifestyle.

## **B - Strengthening the caste system**

Manu clearly says: “The priest, the ruler, and the commoner are the three twice born classes (the three high castes) ... but the fourth, the servant, has only one birth... and there is no fifth.” (M.S. X:4)

Pushyamitra’s Brahmanic counter-revolution was undertaken for the purpose of restoring the ancient social system of Chaturvarna, which under the Buddhist regime was put into the melting pot. The Chaturvarna system of the pre-Buddhist days was quite flexible. It recognised the existence of four different castes (varnas) but it did not prohibit inter-marriage between them. A male of one varna could marry a female of another varna. The Laws of Manu proceeded to put a stop to these intermarriages between the different varnas.

“For the first marriage of twice born men wives of equal caste are recommended.” (M.S.III.12)

“It is declared that a Shudra woman alone can be the wife of a Shudra.” (M.S. III.13)

“Twice born men who in their folly wed wives of the low Shudra caste soon degrade their families and their children to the state of Shudras.” (M.S.III.15)

Manu was not satisfied with the prohibition of intermarriage: he went further and prohibited interdining. The same disgust he shows for Shudra women is shown also about the food of the Shudra, which is considered as impure as seminal impurity, odor, or urine. (M.S.IV.222)

These two laws have enforced and strengthened the caste system. Prohibition of intermarriage and prohibition against interdining are the two pillars on which it rests.

### **C - Degradation of the Shudras**

A Shudra under the Buddhist regime could acquire property, learning and become a respected monk. The Laws of Manu proceeded to bring about a complete demolition of the high status to which the Shudras had been elevated by vilifying the Gospel of Buddhism.

Here are only a few cruel and inhuman discriminatory laws against the Shudras :

- all marriage ties with a Shudra were proscribed
- a Shudra will be a servile person, without education and without properties
- a Shudra must be a person with a contemptible name. Manu will not allow a Shudra the comfort of having a high sounding name.
- a Shudra is not entitled to have any knowledge about religion.

The list could go on and on but the basis of all these inhuman laws is the theory enunciated by Manu in his Code:

“One occupation only the Lord prescribed to the Shudras to serve meekly the three other castes.” (M.S., I:91)

### **D - Slavery of women**

The Manu's laws are equally as harsh towards the Shudras as towards women. Manu starts with a low opinion of women as written in M.S. IX 17:

“The bed and the seat, jewellery, lust, anger, crookedness, a malicious nature and bad conduct are what Manu assigned to women.”

Women are not to be free under any circumstances :

“In childhood a female must be subjected to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons: a woman must never be independent.” (M.S., V:148)

Divorce would be some kind of freedom for a woman but is unthinkable because of the Laws of Manu. Manu reduces a wife to a level of a slave in the matter of property as stated in M.S. IX 146:

“A wife, a son , and a slave: these three are declared to have no property. The wealth they earn is for him to whom they belong.”

Shockingly, a woman under the laws of Manu is subject to corporal punishment and her husband has the right to beat her.

“A wife, a son, a slave, a pupil, and a young brother who have committed faults may be beaten with a rope or a split bamboo.” (M.S., VIII:299)

To ensure the bondage of women and their mental imprisonment, the study of the Scriptures was forbidden to women as it was forbidden to the Shudras.

Offering sacrifices is a very important aspect of Hinduism. As just one more way of subjugating women, the Laws of Manu will not allow women to perform this important religious ritual.

“A woman shall not perform the daily sacrifices prescribed by the Vedas. If she does it she will go to hell.”(M.S., XI:36-37)

In the chapter “*Revolution and Counter Revolution in Ancient India*” in the third volume of Dr. Baba Shaheb Ambedkar’s writings and speeches the writer says:

“Of the black deeds committed by Brahmanism after its triumph over Buddhism this one (slavery of women) is the blackest. There is no parallel in history for so foul deeds of degradation committed by a class of usurpers in the interest of class domination. The colossal character of this deed of degradation perpetuated by Brahmanism is unfortunately not fully realised. It is concealed by those small monosyllabic words: Stri and Shudra.

Let those who wish to get an idea of the enormity of their deed think of the numbers that lie behind these two terms. What part of the population do they apply to? The woman represents one half of the population. Of the balance the Shudra represents not less than two third. The two together make up about 75% of the total population.

It is this huge mass of people that has been doomed by Brahmanism to eternal servility and eternal degradation. It is because of this colossal scale of degradation whereby 75% of her people were deprived of their right to life, liberty and pursuit of happiness that India became a decaying if not a dead nation.” (Vol 3, p. 317)

### **E - Marginazation of the untouchables**

Manu is the first Hindu lawgiver who talks about the Ati-Shudras, the Untouchables in a very clear way. Before Manu, the other Hindu Scriptures say very little about them. Which means that Untouchability, the worst effect of the caste system, must have been another detrimental ramification of the Brahmanic counter-revolution. Something more will be said about this matter later on.

### **Buddhist influences on the brahminical order**

One of the main features of the Brahmanic Hinduism is that it fights against its enemies by using the weapons of the same enemies. Whenever some kind of attack happened against Hinduism this religion reacted against its aggressors by adopting the same measures used by its aggressors. This happened at least four times in the history of Hinduism.

The first time happened when the Aryans invaded the Indian Subcontinent. They fought against the aborigines of India but their struggle against them ended by assimilating many of their gods and goddesses who became part of the Hindu pantheon.

The war, which Brahmanic Hinduism waged against Buddhism, ended with Hinduism misappropriating several beautiful things taken and stolen from Buddhism. Buddhism had a great influence on Hinduism in the following fields :

**Non-violence in regard to vegetarianism.** The Laws of Manu encourage the twice born (high castes) to abstain from eating meat and from killing animals. This kind of behaviour becomes a criterion of purity, which ensures a high position in the hierarchical ladder of the Brahmanic order. (In this regard see M.S.,V: 42 to 56)

Certainly, the Buddhist philosophy is behind this piece of advice given by Manu to the Brahminic order. Unfortunately, the sanctity of life only applied to the privileged class.

**Monastic life.** Hinduism did not have any kind of monastic life. The first Hindu monasteries were founded by Sankaracharya, a famous Hindu scholar of South India in the 7<sup>th</sup> century A. Sankaracharya was a Brahmin who had been strongly influenced by Buddhism.

**Hindu missionary expansion.** Hinduism is not a missionary religion. Its small expansion to the neighbouring countries (like Malaysia-Nepal and Indonesia) starts in the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. The missionary outlook of Hinduism is a fruit of Buddhism.

**Influence on the Mahabharata.** This is the first Hindu scripture that is for everybody. It is also called 'the fifth Veda'. The four Vedas were only for the twice born. The fifth Veda can be read also by the Shudras. This must have happened because Buddhist literature was open to everybody.

**Influence on the Gita.** The founder of Buddhism was a Ksattrya. Sree Krisna, the main actor of the Gita, is a Ksattrya. Both Buddha and Krisna appear as saviours of the human kind. The main tenet of Buddhism is renunciation (*Bhoge noe tage shuk*). The Gita talks about '*niskam prem*', which is a form of renunciation.

**Influence on the Indian National Flag.** The Indian National Flag depicts a Buddhist symbol: the *Dharma Chakra* of Emperor Ashoka. The meaning of this chakra is the Buddhist wheel of truth and justice and righteousness and equality.

Will these ideals ever triumph on the Indian soil? Placing a symbol of equality on the national flag is only just that: a symbol. The flag does not necessarily reflect reality, which is why Dalits all over India have been forced to unite to speak with one cry for justice. The Dalits are clamouring for what Buddha tried to teach millenniums ago. Unfortunately, the structure of the caste system took root and poisoned the mentality of millions so that the injustices spelled out in the Laws of Manu became common practice and blindly accepted.

# CHAPTER 7

## ISLAM: THE SECOND REVOLUTION AGAINST THE CASTE SYSTEM

### THE BHAKTI MOVEMENT: SECOND HINDU COUNTER-REVOLUTION

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#### 1. Islam: second revolution against the caste system

Although the Indian Subcontinent was not divided into the separate nations of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh until the twentieth century, the partition was prefigured by the eleventh century when Islamic civilisation found a permanent home in various parts of the subcontinent. Certain areas were more prone to embrace Islam while other areas remained faithful to Hinduism or some variation of Hinduism.

Within eighty years after the Prophet Mohammed's death, Islam was already in India. Traders from Arabia brought it peacefully to the southern parts of the subcontinent. However, in the northwestern part of the country, Islam arrived with the conqueror's sword at the beginning of the 8<sup>th</sup> century A.D.

Along with Islamic soldiers, came a scientific scholar named Alberuni who wrote the first historical book on India. His "Kitabul Hind" (translated as: Alberuni's India) studied the Hindus' language, religion, astronomy, mathematics, agriculture and industry. He attempted to teach the Muslims to respect Hindu culture. Alberuni also warned the Muslim soldiers about their warlike methods of proposing Islam to the people of the Indian Subcontinent.

For those who would like to acquire more knowledge as to how Islam spread throughout the entire Indian Subcontinent and how Muslims were able to rule the country for more than seven centuries, one should read any of the many books on Indian history. For this research it is enough to say that Islam and Hinduism came to exist side by side on the Indian soil. Like polite strangers, they were very careful in their interaction and in spite of Islamic rule over India for seven hundred years the entire range of moral and social values of Hindu society of those who remained Hindu was practically untouched. Perhaps because Islam and Hinduism were and are two completely different worlds, there was not much melding of the two religions and cultures! Although Hindu and Sufi saints were able to inspire and influence each other, for both sides of orthodox Islam and Hinduism the relationship was primarily one of confrontation. Each side was very much concerned about its different cultural heritage and the two religions were never on friendly terms. An uneasy co-existence developed in many areas, which were

comprised of both Muslims and Hindus, but little interaction took place for the majority of the people.

Having said all of the above though, a sizable number of Hindus were influenced by Islam as tens of millions of Hindus converted to Islam! The great majority of Muslims at the time of partition in 1947 were the offspring not of immigrant conquerors but of converts as more than 100 million people had joined Islam. So, while the two religions remained distinct and intact, the religion of the ruling group attracted or gained a large number of devotees from Hinduism.

There are many theories as to why so many people converted from Hinduism to Islam, how they converted and which groups chose to convert. We do know that more than half of the converts came from two areas: the Indus River Valley and the valley of the Brahmaputra and Ganges delta which were one thousand two hundred miles apart—one in Pakistan and the other in Bangladesh. It remains a mystery as to why so many people from these two areas joined Islam.

Some scholars think that one great advantage that Islam had over Hinduism and Buddhism was the promise of a joyful afterlife if the main tenets of Islam were followed. Such a belief was practically unknown in the Indian Subcontinent until Islam arrived.

Another explanation for the vast numbers of conversions is Islam's similarities to Buddhism in being more simplistic and clear than Hinduism. There is in Islam's austere discipline, inner harmony and call to prayer five times a day a certain throwback to Buddhist monastic discipline that is missing in the more complicated teachings of Hinduism. Islam was attractive because of its simple and well-defined beliefs. The sacred law grounded in the Koran and interpreted by the community left little doubt about what a person should do to live well in society and to gain salvation.

As always, one must consider the economic motivation for any actions taken by a people. During the times of conversion to Islam, the religion of the conquerors would have opened up job opportunities within the Muslim administration and army. To remain Hindu might have meant a suffering of job discrimination whether it be subtle or blatantly built into the laws.

Which groups from the Hindu society joined Islam or were attracted to Islam? Two of the groups most discriminated against in Hinduism were the Shudras or untouchables and women so it is natural that the two most oppressed groups would seek relief through any means. One theory is that of all the castes only the Shudras converted. There may be some truth in this theory since the Shudras were outsiders to accessing any privileges of Hindu society as the book "The Laws of Manu" clearly shows. Also, Islam also may have had a mass appeal to women for it condemned the Hindus' widow burning practices. Islam, while not a bastion of women's rights, was more lenient towards women than Hinduism.

To be sure one of the main reasons for conversion to Islam was the Islamic sense of egalitarianism and brotherhood which must have attracted millions of Hindu out caste and low caste people. The Muslim social order sharply contrasted with the caste ridden

social structure of conservative Hinduism. The idea of social equality was a revolutionary force. Allah was one. Salvation was open to all. All Muslim men, high and low, who assembled at the same place and prostrated before the unseen God must have been an unusual phenomenon for the Hindu masses. Islam rejected completely the idea of superiority by birth and the hierarchical principle of the caste system, the rock on which the entire structure of Hinduism was based.

While the reasons for conversion were varied, scholars agree that the Sufi Movement eventually played a large role in the conversion process to Islam. The Sufis were very pious unorthodox Muslims who were concerned more with inner spiritual exercises than with the observance of the external practices of Islam. The Sufis came to India (and especially to East Bengal) to preach the gospel of the unity of God and the equality of men.

From the beginning of their missionary activities the Sufis paid attention to educating the people and they practiced what they preached as Buddha had successfully done centuries before. They led a life of simplicity and austerity and did not hesitate to perform humble works. In addition to missionary activities, they set up humanitarian institutions, which contributed to the happiness of the people. They presented religion to be more than rituals and formalities and made 'service to humanity' one of its essential principles.

The Sufis also added the need for a '*pir*' (or *guru* as in Hinduism or a teacher as in Buddhism) maintaining that one needs a guide to find the ultimate reality. So the Sufis brought new and refreshing ideas such as equality and serving others along with keeping some traditional practices such as having a guru. Many Hindus realized there were both spiritual and practical benefits to gain from converting from Hinduism to Islam.

Even today in Bangladesh, the tombs of these Sufis remain renowned places for pilgrimages, festivals and fairs. The Sufis still exist in Bangladesh and continue to have an effect on Muslims and Hindus as well.

The Sufis were living witnesses for the Islamic faith. For an uneducated, illiterate population of Hindus, the Sufi's actions spoke louder than words since so many could not read words anyway! Just two examples of Sufi saints are two men who lived and worked in southwestern Bangladesh. One lived in Satkhira and the other one ran a small orphanage in Jessore.

Mr. Sharifullah, who lived in Satkhira, was a schoolteacher and a close friend of Father Tedesco Sebastiano. Together the two of them made the first attempt at conducting an inter-religious dialogue between Muslims and Christians, which was quite successful. Mr. Sharifullah was an amazing person as he was always kind and friendly towards everybody. He used to visit the Christian Mission in Satkhira every week and prayed in the Sisters' chapel. He maintained that Christians and Muslims have to join hands and work together because Christians have the strength of love and Muslims have the strength of faith. He knew Father Mario Veronesi and very often he went to Shimulia Mission to have spiritual conversations with him. A person such as Mr. Sharifullah, who was non-judgmental towards others and who treated others equally,



would indeed appeal to those out caste who had been scorned for centuries by leaders within their own religion.

Another example of a Sufi was Pir Abdul Rajjak Chisti who lived in Jessore. He ran his small orphanage solely through local contributions. He also became involved in activities of inter-religious dialogue and made the proposal to offer the possibility to Hindu people to attend the inter-religious meetings. He had a special affection for low caste and out caste people. When somebody among them would visit him, he would insist on treating them as his honorable guests and he would sit down and eat with them. Dining communally is something their own religious leaders would never have offered low castes. This action alone of dining together would have attracted many Hindus and make them start to question the way to a more humane life might be through Islam.

These modern day examples of Sufi leaders merely show the impact that the Sufis were and are able to have upon a downtrodden group of people within Hindu society.

## 2. The Bhakti movement: second Hindu counter-revolution

It has already been stated that Hinduism fights against its enemies by using the same weapons of its enemies. After the second revolution brought forward by Islam against the Brahmanic social order, another counter-revolution took place in the Indian Subcontinent. Attracted by the egalitarian message and brotherhood preached by Islam and put into practice by the Sufi missionaries, crowds of out caste and low caste Hindu people (and also Buddhist people who could not stand the tyranny of the Brahmanic order) joined the new religion.

In order to stop this huge exodus towards Islam the Bhakti movement was born. In order to understand the word '*bhakti*' one needs a little bit of knowledge about the three main cults of Hinduism, which are:

- the cult of Siva
- the cult of Visnu
- the cult of the Mother goddess( Kali – Durga)

Visnu is a god who incarnates himself and from time to time appears on earth in different shapes. Krisna is the most important incarnation of Visnu. In the Gita, this god asks his worshipers for self-surrender and devotional love (*bhakti*). There is a saying in Bengali which summarizes the main message of the Gita: "*Bhoktite Mukti*" (Salvation comes through devotional love).

The god Krisna, who speaks in the Gita, is a warrior and as such does not inspire too much devotional love. In other Hindu Scriptures though, Krisna is first a lovely child and then a handsome young man who not only inspires devotional love but stirs up beautiful young girls as well. These young girls follow Krisna as bees in search of honey. The '*bhakti*' these Scriptures talk about is quite erotic and inspires erotic feelings in spite of the attempts made by Indian poets who tried to give this '*bhakti*' a spiritual interpretation. These poets are:

- Mirabai: a lady who falls in love with Krisna
- Joydeb: his songs are well known
- Chandidas
- Biddapoti

The 'bhakti' Krisna talks about in the Gita has no erotic connotation. It is rather like the 'agape' of the Gospel according to St. John. The main text for this 'bhakti' is found in Gita 9:32. That verse says:

"All those who come to me for shelter, however weak or humble or sinful they may be—women or Vaisyas or Shudras - they all reach the Path supreme."

This verse implies that Krisna accepts devotional love from everybody and through this bhakti, ties of friendship and brotherhood should exist among Krisna's devotees. Therefore the 'bhakti' movement becomes a way of destroying the barrier of caste and establishing some kind of equalitarian relationship among the Hindus who worship Krisna. Another name for the 'bhakti movement' is 'Vaisnav Tantra.'

Here are names of those who played a vital role in this movement:

**Ramanuja:** a philosopher of South India who set up the theological framework of the movement. He stressed the principle '*bhoktite mukti*' and he taught that by concentrated and intense devotion to Visnu-Krisna the devotee realizes that he is a fragment of the deity and wholly dependent on him. His teachings influenced the devotional cults of later time. However, he reserved the 'bhakti movement' only for the Brahminical order.

**Ramananda:** (1370-1440 A.D.) a disciple of Ramanuja and a monk who started using 'bhakti' towards Krisna as a way of fostering brotherhood and equality. After moving away from Ramanuja's orthodoxy he challenged caste divisions, questioned the traditional ceremonies and by preaching in Hindi rather than in Sanskrit, which was confined to the upper castes, he gave an impetus to popular literature.

As Ramananda detached himself from the orthodox customs of traditional Hinduism he was able to give the new religious movement great appeal and vitality. He is supposed to have had twelve disciples most of whom came from low castes. One of them, Ravidas, was a cobbler. It appears that the Rishis of Bangladesh got their name from this famous ancestor of theirs (See Father John Fagan's paper: The Mochi Untouchables: a people set apart.)

Rabindranath Tagore has three beautiful poems about Ramananda and Ravidas titled: *Shuchi*, *Snan somapon*, *Premar shona*.

The poem 'snan somapon' talks about Ramananda who after his morning bath goes to visit the village of a Chamar-Mochi-Rishi.

"He reached the lane which took him to the evil smelling village of the tanners where lean dogs were crunching bones at the wayside and kites swooped down upon casual morsels of flesh.

Bhajan (a cobbler) sat before his cottage door under an ancient tamarind tree working at a camel's saddle...

Ramananda drew him to his heart and Bhajan, his eyes filled with tears, cried in dismay: 'Master, why do you bring upon you such pollution?

And Master said: 'I cried this morning to the Sun: The Divine Person who is in you is also within me. I have met him at this moment when his light descends upon your forehead as well as mine and there is no need for me to go to the temple.'"

The “**Maharashtra ‘Quartet’**”. Ramananda’s influence is quite strong in the province of Maharashtra where we find four poets who are called ‘the quartet of Maharashtra’. Their names are: *Gendeb, Namdeb, Ekanath, Tukaram*

All of the Maharashtra poets are low caste people who fought against the caste system. In their poems they talk about the dignity of man irrespective of birth, caste and social status.

In January, 1997 a very interesting article appeared on *Vidyaajati* about one of the above poets, Tukaram. Tukaram was born at the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century from a low caste Shudra family. For a Shudra to write poetry on religious themes and in colloquial Marathi was an offence to the Brahmins who saw Tukaram’s work as an act of heresy and defiance of the caste system. He became part of the Bhakti movement, which was the middle way between the extremes of Brahmanism on the one hand, and folk religion on the other. He wrote nearly 5000 poems and disappeared mysteriously at the age of forty-one. Tukaram strongly attacked the degenerate state of Brahminical Hinduism and preached universal love and compassion.

Those who have studied Tukaram say that his stature in Marathi literature is comparable to that of Shakespeare in English and Goethe in German. Tukaram’s poetry has shaped the Marathi language as 50 million people speak it today so it is not only the literary language. Tukaram’s poetry is also used by illiterate millions to voice their prayers and to express their love to God.

His and the other Marathi poets’ egalitarian legacy was taken up by other famous social reformers like Jotiba Phule and B.R. Ambedkar.

Here are some quotations from one of Tukaram’s poems against the Brahmins:

“Drop-outs from decency Brahmins lie and steal...  
They occupy seats of power and mete out injustice to the poor...  
They write inventories of the pantry  
Thinking of ghee, oil and soap...  
They become the hired servants of the corrupt...  
Says Tuka... have you dozed off, my Lord?  
Run to their rescue, be quick’!  
And against the Hindu ‘gurus’...  
I know no trick to lure the public  
I work no miracles... I wake no dead  
I have no hordes of disciples to advertise my selfishness  
I am not the lord of a monastery thriving on grants of land  
I run no God shop to worship personal profit  
I am no teller of tales from the Puranas...  
I am no wretched pundit splitting Vedantic hairs  
I swing no rosary to gather fools around me....  
Tuka is not like any of these crazed citizens of hell”

**Sri Krisna Chaitanna Mohaprobhu:** was born in West Bengal at the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century and is considered an incarnation of Krisna by the followers of the Vaisnav Tantra. He is the most famous name of the Bhakti movement. He is still very popular among the Hindus of rural Bangladesh and he is known by these four names: Nimai (since he was born under a *neem* tree), Bisshombor, Gourango, Hori. In many

Hindu villages still today one can find small temples containing four statues and people know that these images stand for the following names: Nimai, Nitai, Madai, Jogai

Nimai is the first name for Sri Chaitanna. Nitai is the abbreviation of 'Nittananda', Nimai's associate. Madai (from Madhob) and Jogai (from Jogonnath) are the names of two Brahmins who did not like Nimai's religious activities and tried to prevent him from carrying them out.

Nimai and his associate Nitai started a new devotional cult called the '*Nam kirtan*' or '*Hori nam*' which sang Krishna's praises. After having mystic experiences, he changed his name from Nimai into "Sri Krishna Chaitanna Deb" (Consciousness of Lord Krishna). His basic message was 'love for God and love for man'. He preached the Buddhist principle of non-violence. In Bengali his religious doctrine is called "*Prem dharma-Prem totto-Ponchom Purushartha*". Nimai attracted crowds of followers among low caste people. He traveled around India to preach his 'Bhakti' for Krishna and it seems he was able to convert back to Hinduism a good number of Muslim people.

Chaitanna Mohaprobhu's movement is still alive among the Hindus. Every year in almost every Hindu village an interesting festival takes place: its name is 'nam jagga'. For a few days Krishna's devotees get together to sing Krishna's praises. On these occasions caste walls and barriers fall down. Different castes' people even agree to eat together. Sadly, as soon as the festival is over, walls and barriers reappear again. Perhaps, something is better than nothing!

**Kabir:** was a disciple of Ramananda and was a Muslim weaver. He lived in the fifteenth century and became famous in North India. Both the Sufi movement and the Bhakti movement inspired him. He struck at the roots of every kind of religious rituals and superstition. He attacked both Muslim fanaticism and Hindu stupidities such as the caste system, idolatry and polytheism. He was considered as a saint by both Hindus and Muslims and attracted many followers. Kabir composed songs for the common people and choose Hindi rather than Sanskrit as his medium. Along with Buddha, Baba Shaheb Ambedkar took him as his 'guru'.

Here are a few lines from Kabir's poems:

"It's all one skin and bone...  
one piss and shit....  
one blood one meat...  
From one drop a universe...  
Who is Brahmin? Who is Sudra? ...  
Pandit, look in your heart for knowledge  
Tell me where untouchability came from, since you believe in it...  
We eat by touching.... We wash by touching...  
From a touch the world was born...  
So who is untouched...? asks Kabir'.

**Dadu:** Outstanding among Kabir's followers was Dadu. One of Dadu's dreams was the unification of faiths and for this purpose he founded the '*Brahma Sampradaya*' for the worship of God without ritual and orthodoxy. He rejected all Hindu scriptures both Hindu and Muslim and preached love and friendliness for all creatures. Historians

say that Akbar, the great Moghul emperor, was inspired by Dadu in his attempt to unite all religious faiths in his '*Din-i-Ilahi*' (the Lord's religion) and probably it was Dadu's Brahma Sampradaya that gave him such a liberal outlook.

**The Bauls of Bengal:** are a very interesting group among the many religious groups India has produced. The main features of the Baul movement are well expressed in the following song:

"That is why, brother, I became a madcap Baul...  
No master I obey, nor injunctions, canons or customs.  
Man made distinctions have no hold on me.  
I rejoice in the gladness of the love that wells out of my being  
In love there is no separation but a meeting of hearts...  
So I rejoice in song and I dance with each and all....  
That is why, brother, I became a madcap Baul"

The Bauls accept no divisions of society, such as caste or class, no special deity, nor any temple or mosque. As a rule, the Baul devotees come from the lowest social strata of the Hindu and the Muslim fold and this is one of the reasons why they are often looked down upon by the orthodox members of both communities.

Their general attitudes towards temples and mosques as well as other forms of religious institutions may have had its origin in the restrictions and discriminations against their low caste and class members. It is difficult to trace the origin of the Baul movement because there are no written records. There are no records because the members of the movement are more often than not illiterate and because of their prejudice against recording their history. It seems that Baulism has drawn its beliefs from Buddhist philosophies, Sufism, and the Bhakti movement.

The most famous among the Bauls of Bengal is Lalon Shah Faqir (ascetic mendicant) who lived to the age of 116. He traveled a great deal and composed hundreds of songs. Rabindranath Tagore took a great deal of interest in Lalon's songs and other Baul melodies, which he loved very much. The Bangladesh national anthem written by Tagore comes from a Baul melody.

Here are a few quotations from one of Lalon's songs:

"A new Krisna has brought new laws...  
Judging to these laws he finds fault with the ancient Vedas.  
He recognizes no caste differences:  
he demands only the way of love.  
See for yourself-what is true? What is false?  
What kind of house do you live in?  
What is your caste or lack of it?  
God prescribes Truth, so no one pays attention to the Vedas any more.  
Lalon says: Let me devote myself to truth!"

As a concluding note about Islam and the Bhakti Movement, it should be said that both of them propagated a religious philosophy, which opposed the caste system and recognized the social dignity of equality of man. However, neither Islam nor the Bhakti

Movement could seriously affect the system because neither of them was able to initiate a new economic order. Moreover, the virus of casteism contaminated Islam.

Those who are busy with development work in Bangladesh should read this very important and valuable book: *“Islam, Identity, and Human Development in Bangladesh”* by David Abecassis. Here is a quotation from this book:

“It is impossible to understand aspects of the present world view or rural Muslims in Bangladesh without appreciating that for over 1,000 years before the arrival of Islam in Bengal, rural society had been influenced by, or structured upon, a Hindu view based on the caste system, and this world view has continued to exist alongside the Muslims ever since, continually influencing them. While, therefore, aspects of the caste system continue to influence the world view and culture of the rural Muslims, the rigour and importance of this influence is, perhaps, on the wane.” (pp. 36-37)

In the past, there existed a widespread distinction within the Indian Muslim society which divided people into the following four groups: the Ashrafs, the Atrafs, the Arzals, the Ajlafs.

The Ashrafs were the high class groups who would claim descent from noble ancestors often related to the Prophet Mohammad. The Atrafs were the second group on the hierarchical ladder. The Arzals were the commoners. The Ajlafs were the lower groups who did all the menial works which in the Hindu caste system were the polluting occupations.

This fourfold classification is a reproduction of the Hindu caste system with minor variations. Islam in India was unable to get rid of casteism. It seems that Christianity fell into the same trap and was poisoned by the ideas of caste which will be discussed in a later chapter.

# CHAPTER 8

## CHRISTIANITY: THE THIRD REVOLUTION AGAINST THE CASTE SYSTEM

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The caste system and its negative effect of untouchability received the third blow from Europeans who initially were mainly interested in commercial activities. The European merchants were searching for silk, spices, tea, cotton, and easier trade routes. Later, two reasons were given to justify European colonialization: true faith, civilization

It seems Portuguese colonialism concentrated primarily on spreading the Christian faith while English colonialism was busy mainly with civilization.

Vasco da Gama was the first European to reach India. Subsequently, the Dutch, French and eventually the English came. Of all the colonial powers, the British would have the greatest impact on the subcontinent. In the beginning, the British were busy only with commercial activities through the East India Company but after the Plassey battle in 1757 India became part of the British Raj and political colonialism started. Lord Hastings and Lord Cornwallis (1785-1790) set up 48 rules and regulations for the British Administration in India. Some of these rules are still used by the Indian Government.

The British Raj in India was very careful not to interfere with Indian social and religious customs. British Governors understood that they would not been able to rule India by touching those sensitive issues. For this reason, they neither supported nor encouraged missionary activities. British government officials kept political business completely separated from religious ones.

The British Raj had a dual effect on the caste system: first it strengthened it and then it weakened it. It strengthened it in the following ways:

- Through the Permanent Land Settlement Act in 1793 the British Administration gave the land to the Brahmins and the high castes who became extremely rich.
- The British Raj needed an efficient bureaucracy for which knowledge of English was required. Only Brahmins and high caste people were able to learn this prestigious language.

On the other hand, the same British Raj weakened the caste system by offering new possibilities for the low castes and for the Untouchables. The British Administration was not primarily concerned with the problems of the Untouchables or their socio-economic development but the colonial policy undermined the traditional restrictions and discriminatory attitude of the Brahminical order towards them the British did not believe in untouchability. So, when employment and educational opportunities became available to all members of society, the Untouchables were also able to take advantage

of these long denied opportunities. Some people from the lowest castes gained employment in factories, mills, and the Army.

Along with these employment opportunities, the progressive educational policy of the Government opened up new chances. In 1858 Government schools in Bombay were declared open to all castes including the Untouchables. The Untouchables gained a right they had never had before. Baba Shaheb Ambedkar's father was one of these untouchables from Maharastra who took advantage of these opportunities that had never before been offered to the untouchables.

The British legal system was another factor, which opened the door for justice to the low castes and the untouchables. The British laws were based on the principle of equality of all men and therefore opposed caste distinctions and caste privileges as criteria to administer justice. The new laws introduced by the British gave the Untouchables the chance to challenge the caste system.

Simultaneously to political conquests, various groups were showing Christian religious interest in the subcontinent.

### Catholic Missionary Activity

The Catholic Church arrived in India with the Portuguese. Upon arriving in India, the Portuguese discovered the oldest Indian Christian community living on the South West Coast. They were the Syrian Christians of Malabar, in Kerala. Very little is known about the origins of this group of Christians. Most of them believe that the Apostle St. Thomas founded their Church. Another tradition says that Thomas Cana, a Syrian merchant settled in Malabar in the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. and founded the Syrian Church.

The Portuguese learned that the Syrian Christians of Malabar had adopted completely the Hindu way of life. They exhibited all the qualities of the caste system: endogamy, hereditary occupations, the entire apparatus of ritual pollution, etc. They were regarded as a caste and had a recognized place in the caste hierarchy. As a caste they were a closed group so they had not attempted to recruit other people as members of their churches. The Portuguese were able to reshape their liturgy into a Roman style but were not able to arouse among the Syrian Christians an eagerness for evangelization. Interestingly enough, things have not changed too much since then as converts from other groups still are not welcome into this Church and there are no priests from converted people.

The Portuguese started their proselytizing work in Goa and surrounding areas. It appears from history that most conversions to Christianity were forced. Very early the Portuguese understood that by converting the Brahmins, the Church would become rooted in the Indian soil. Special laws (known as the laws of Rigour of Mercy to save souls), the destruction of temples, and confiscation of property were executed so that the Brahmins would be prepared to become Christians.

The Portuguese followed the 'filtration strategy' in religious instruction. This strategy assumed that once the Brahmins accepted the Christian faith other castes would follow them. So an in depth religious education was given only to the Brahmins. The 'great tradition' of catechism, which included the Creed and the study of the Bible, was only taught to the Brahmins. For all others, the 'little tradition' of devotions and indulgences was considered to be adequate. In addition to endowing the Brahmins exclusive-



ly with the highest education, only Brahmins were admitted to priesthood. The law that only Brahmins could become priests remained in force until the end of the monarchy in Portugal in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The following documents refer to this matter:

1. "Candidates for the priesthood should commonly be from the honored (high) and clean castes because the other Christians respect them more." (Third Provincial Council of Goa held in 1585)
2. "For the dignity of priesthood and the respect due to ecclesiastical persons, low castes should not be admitted to orders. Only sons of higher castes, for example Brahmins and Prabhus, should be ordained. The Synod instructs Rectors of Seminaries not to teach Latin to non Brahmins. But all Thomas (Syrian) Christians of long and noble standing, may be admitted to all sacred studies and to Latin." (Fifth Provincial Council of Goa held in 1606)

### St. Francis Xavier

After the conversion of some Brahmins, the second group of people converted to Christianity by the Portuguese were the 'Paravas' of the Coromandel coast who were out caste fishermen. They joined the Catholic Church in order to gain protection from Muslim oppression. They were baptized en masse and then left for six years without any instruction or pastoral care until the arrival of St. Francis Xavier who impressed the Catholic faith in them so deeply that nothing could erase it.

### Roberto De Nobili

Robert De Nobili, a famous Italian Jesuit missionary, worked in Madurai (Tamil Nadu). De Nobili experimented by appearing among the Brahmins and the high castes as a Christian "*guru*". He invited them to join Christianity without renouncing the hierarchical principles of the caste system. In order to win to the Catholic Church as many people as he could, De Nobili separated his upper castes "flock" from the low castes Christians. Complete separation was also observed in churches and even between the missionaries serving different castes.

Roberto De Nobili was convinced that the caste system was a social element more than a religious one and therefore it could be retained within the Church. Moreover, he interpreted it according to the European Estates of that time so he argued that if hierarchical order could be maintained in Christian Europe, he could see no point in throwing it out of Christianity in India.

Prohibition to follow Roberto De Nobili's method of conversion came from Rome in 1744. Even so, that kind of accommodation to caste customs and principles has remained in the Catholic Church up until today and Roberto de Nobili very often is considered responsible for having planted and grown the poisonous seed of casteism in the Indian Catholic Church.

It is hard to believe that only as recently as 1982, the first official statement of the Indian Catholic Church against casteism was pronounced in the following statement:

"The Catholic Bishops' Conference of India stated categorically that the 'caste mentality' and caste discrimination are a denial of Christianity. And delay in facing the issue of caste is a betrayal of the Christian vocation. Catholics in particular are

called to reflect on whether they can meaningfully participate in the Eucharist without repudiating and seriously striving to root out caste prejudices and similar traditions and sentiments, both within the Church and outside. It is intolerable that caste should be a determining factor in membership of pastoral or parish councils and other church associations, and even worse, in ecclesiastical appointments and posts of responsibility in religious Congregations.” (CBCI Statement on Caste-January 1982).

## Protestant Missionaries

The first Protestant Missionaries in India were the Baptists sent out by the English Missionary Societies founded around the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The most famous missionary among the Baptists was William Carey who became the pioneer of missionary activity in Bengal where he arrived in 1793. Most missionaries working in Bangladesh know about the great achievements of this inspirational missionary whose motto was: “*Expect great things from God – Attempt great things for God.*”

The Baptist missionaries quickly understood that the caste system was a monumental impediment to missionary activity and did not hesitate to condemn it. They saw caste as:

- a prison which enslaves innocent human beings
- a system which prevents human improvement
- an obstacle to real community
- a cursed invention of the devil
- a barrier to ordinary acts of humanity
- a masterpiece of hell
- the most effective and powerful defense against conversion

Therefore, William Carey and his associates fought against the caste system with all their strength.

The Scottish Missionary Society arrived in Calcutta in 1829. The great missionary from this society was Alexander Duff. He and his colleagues were the first to use education as an invaluable weapon against the caste system, which was seen by them as:

- the main obstacle to enlightenment
- the main reason for the changelessness of Indian institutions

The Scottish Missionary Society opened schools for everybody irrespective of caste and creed in the hope that these schools would create a new kind of consciousness and leadership for reformation of the Hindu society. Alexander Duff faced every kind of opposition to his educational policy but like William Carey he and his colleagues were uncompromising.

Both William Carey and Alexander Duff have a great impact on the Hindu society of Bengal. Also, the Anglican Church also was adamant in rejecting the caste system and considered it as absolutely incompatible with the principles of Christian morals.

By the eighteen fifties all the Protestant missions were in agreement in saying that caste was a great evil of which the Christian Churches had to be aware. Most believed that caste was one of the greatest obstacles to the progress of spreading the Gospel in India. The Protestant missionaries interpreted the Gospel to be egalitarian and truly tried to live and practice what they preached in India by denouncing the caste system and its effects.

## Catholics / Protestants

By now, it should be clear that the Catholics and Protestants differed greatly in their approach to introducing Christianity to the people of the subcontinent. What was the main reason behind this different outlook in regard to the caste issue? Most of the Protestant missionaries came from North European countries where the egalitarian ideologies of the Enlightenment and the 18<sup>th</sup> century political revolutions had taken root. Therefore the Protestants considered the inequalities of the caste system to be the antithesis of the ideas of equality that they had been taught.

Most of the Catholic missionaries on the contrary came from the more traditional South European countries where Monarchical Estates system was considered the natural social order. So, they viewed the caste system as a legitimate form of stratification and were not so preoccupied with attacking it.

## The 1857 Mutiny and Caste

In 1857, for the first time in the history of the British Raj a revolt of Indian soldiers recruited for the British Army occurred. The stated reason of the Revolt was the fact that the Hindu soldiers did not want to touch cartridges sealed with beef grease but the real reasons were related to caste problems. The British Raj enacted various rules and laws, which weakened the caste system. For example, the British Raj abolished the custom of burning the widows, which was one way to maintain the caste system. Also, the British Raj refused to recognize the privileged status of the Brahmins. Thus, soldiers in prison were forced to eat food cooked by impure hands.

Protestant missionaries saw the Lord's hand in this revolt which they considered as the official beginning of a struggle between Christianity and Hinduism. They hoped the government would step in and along with the Church would take drastic measures against caste. Somebody spoke of 'Five Blows' against caste:

- confiscation of the lands of the Brahmins
- abolition of caste distinctions in jails
- access of Indian Christians to government jobs
- raising of the Untouchables from their degradation
- eradication of the evil of caste through the power of the Holy Spirit...

However, the Government clung to its principle of non-interference in the religious and social matters of the Hindus. Nevertheless, Protestant missionaries continued with their war against caste.

Even the famous German Indologist Max Muller took part in this war and advised the missionaries not to be so angry against this social institution which could in the future become a powerful force for conversion of huge groups of Hindus. Max Muller's prophecy was fulfilled at the end of that century through the mass conversion of the Untouchables.

## Mass Conversion of the Untouchables

Between 1860 and 1920 an unprecedented phenomenon happened all over India: many groups of Untouchables asked to join Christianity. Churches (both Protestant and Catholic) which had been static for decades began to grow at a rapid rate because of

mass conversion from the out caste untouchables. A beautiful book is available on this part of history of Christianity in India titled “*The Dalit Christians*” by Dr. C. B. Webster (an American scholar who has a deep interest in the history and problems of the out caste-Untouchables-Dalits of the Indian Subcontinent). Dr. Webster is also the editor of a very interesting magazine called the “*Dalit International Newsletter*”. It is published three times a year through which Dr. Webster aims at making the problems of the Untouchables-Dalits of India known all over the world.

Before this mass movement of the Untouchables in India, there were primarily four groups of Christians:

- The Syrian Christians discovered by the Portuguese
- St. Francis Xavier’s Christians drawn from outcaste fishermen
- Roberto De Nobili’s Christians molded by De Nobili’s experiments in converting Brahmins
- Christians converted from the Shudra castes (little is written about this group and further research is needed)

Besides St. Francis Xavier’s Christians there were practically no out caste – Untouchables people converted to Christianity in the Indian Churches (both Catholic and Protestant). The conversion movement which occurred at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was completely unexpected by Christian missionaries who were not prepared to handle it. Moreover many missionaries did not welcome this movement because they did not want ‘burdens’ and ‘rubbish’ in their Churches.

What were the reasons behind the mass conversion of the Untouchables?

1. The first reason is found in the loss of strength of the Bhakti Movement which gave the out caste and the Untouchables a chance to experience human dignity and respect. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century this movement grew weak and the Untouchables lost their hope of liberation within the Hindu fold. People grew to believe the only hopes for liberation remained outside the Hindu caste system.
2. The second reason was the abolition of the ‘Jajmani system’ which came to an end when the British Raj declared the Permanent Land Settlement Act. The Jajmani system was a system of economic interdependence and division of labor in which land was owned by one caste rather than an individual person. Agricultural work as well as other services were divided among all the castes and the land owning caste was obliged by law and custom to distribute grain to all the castes of the village according to their status in the caste hierarchy providing in this way material security for every individual. With the end of the Jajmani system the untouchables lost this material security but they gained freedom from the system that perpetuated their oppressive state. Now they could look for liberation elsewhere if such an ‘agency’ could be found. Christianity and other religions (such as Islam and Shikism) were the agencies which would provide the Untouchables with respect and dignity.

These out caste – Untouchables who joined Christianity during that period were very often called “rice Christians” because they wanted material gains from Christianity. They came to Christianity in times of famines, droughts, and epidemics. Missionaries did their best to help them even if the search for material security was one of the reasons for this mass movement. Apart from economic gains, though, the search for digni-

ty, self-respect, brotherhood and equality and ability to choose one's own destiny were powerful incentives for conversion to Christianity.

The same mass conversion movement occurred among the Tribal people of India. The Forest Act passed by the British Raj in 1800 had disrupted their way of living. In order to save their land, they approached Christian missionaries for help and many of the tribal people joined the Church. Just one of these missionaries was the Jesuit Father Constant Lievens who played a very active role among the Tribal people of Chotanagpur.

This mass conversion movement of the untouchable – outcaste – tribal people became the real foundation of Indian Christianity. More than 75% of the members of the different Indian Churches (both Catholic and Protestant) comes either from the out caste – Untouchable people or from the Tribal people. The mass movement continued until the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when it stopped for the following reasons:

1. What the out caste – Untouchables were looking for (material security, human dignity and self-respect) was not always found. The missionaries were more interested in 'saving souls' than in redressing the real grievances of the new members of their churches.
2. In 1925 the great leader of the Untouchables, Baba Shaheb Ambedkar, entered the Indian political arena. It was at that time, the Untouchables realized that other roads for their liberation could be followed. They discovered the power of political action in their struggle for equal opportunities.
3. The Government started the new policy of 'Reversed Discrimination' for the Untouchables. This proved to be another golden chance for them to get access to those opportunities and facilities, which had been denied to them for centuries.

One wonders why both Catholic and Protestant missionaries were unable to understand that the continuation of the conversion mass movement of the Untouchables searching for a new religion to join could have been an incredible opportunity for Christian Churches in India to expand and increase their numbers. During that particular historical period, the Holy Spirit seemed to be working very hard but Christian missionaries did not realize that most probably times were ripe for a great harvest to carry on. There were the initial conversions but missionaries were unable to sustain and increase the Christian flocks. They lacked an in-depth understanding of the mentality of the untouchables. Possibly, the missionaries needed a great leader such as Ambedkar to remind them that Jesus Christ was the liberator of the poor and low castes and that He was the physician for the Untouchables. The missionaries needed a reminder that Christ and Christianity belonged to the lower classes. It is hoped that today's Christian missionaries in the subcontinent will learn from previous lost opportunities and the blunders of others. It would behoove them to learn and listen to the advice of the indigenous heroes of the downtrodden such as Ambedkar so that they might better serve the needs of the untouchables while carrying out Christ's message at the same time.

# CHAPTER 9

## THE THIRD COUNTER-REVOLUTION:

### THE INDIAN RENAISSANCE

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As described in previous chapters, each time a movement threatened Hinduism, a counter movement evolved to help protect and maintain Hinduism. As alluded to earlier, Buddhism dealt the caste system its first blow, which was quite heavy. The second blow to Hinduism emanated from Islam. Christianity inflicted the strongest blow to the Brahmanic order in two ways:

- through European colonialism
- through Christian missionary activity

Christianity challenged Hinduism in the following ways:

- by attacking the caste system and uplifting the Untouchables
- by spreading new European ideas such as rationality, equality, freedom, social progress, humanitarianism
- by social reforms introduced by the British Raj such as prohibition of “sati” (widows’ burning), children’s marriage, widows’ remarriage and other such practices considered to be barbaric
- by keeping politics separate from religion

Following historical precedents, leaders and followers of Hinduism responded to the threat of Christianity in five ways:

1. complete indifference to the Christian challenge
2. criticism of Hindu traditions and judicious attempts for social reforms
3. return to the roots of Hinduism itself and attempts of self-regeneration
4. complete rejection and refusal of the Brahmanic order
5. modern liberal thinking

Examination of these responses one-by-one will expand our knowledge about the thinkers, writers and social reformers who were the main actors of the Indian Renaissance .

#### 1. Complete indifference to the Christian challenge

Some followers of Hinduism chose to ignore every external challenge and continued with its habits, customs and ceremonies without feeling troubled or disturbed either by Islam or by Christian missionaries or by British Colonialism.

The most famous representative of this complete indifference was **Sri Ramakrishna Param Hansha Deb**, the holy man who spent almost his entire life at Daskhineswar, a Hindu sanctuary on the river Hoogly, five miles away from Calcutta.

His greatest achievement was to inspire Narendranath Dutta (who later became the famous Swami Vivekananda) to give up worldly pleasures and to set up a monastic order, which took his name: “*Ramakrisna Mission*.” Sri Ramkrisna Param Hansha Deb is quite famous among the Hindus of Bengal who not only show great devotion to him but many of them even worship him as a godly incarnation. Very often, pictures of this holy man can be found in the houses of Hindu people.

## 2. Criticism of Hindu tradition and attempt for social reforms

The most famous Hindu who started this new trend was **Ram Mohan Roy** who is called “the Father of modern India” because he pointed out the direction for India’s response to the West. Through the Bhramo Society which he founded in 1828 he evaluated the ideas and values of Western civilization and he tried to adapt them to the Indian mind.

Ram Mohan Roy was born into an orthodox Brahmin family and devoted most of his life to study and social reforms. From the ethical ideas of Christianity and the political philosophies of Europe he received inspiration for his protests against Hindu social evils such as cremation of widows, child marriages and the practice of untouchability. He also criticized idolatry and polytheism in Hinduism. By studying Hindu Scriptures, he discovered that the corrupt practices of Hindu society were contrary not only to the ideals of the West but to the ideals of India as well. Through his Brahmo Society he dreamed of creating a modern India that would combine the best ideas and traditions of both India and the West.

The three pillars of the Society were:

- rationalism
- humanism
- social reforms

The first idea was that religious belief should be based on reason rather than on feeling, dogma, myths and superstitions. The second and third ideas were that all underprivileged members of society were to be uplifted through programs of social reforms including universal education and civil rights.

From these pillars, Ram Mohan drew the social philosophy of the two main principles of the Brahma Society. These principles are the foundation of a modern welfare state and are quoted here:

- “Every human being has a right to all the means of improvement that society can provide”.
- “Every society has an obligation to provide all the means to a full human life.”

Certainly, Ram Mohan Roy was surely inspired by Christianity in his new outlook but at the same time he tried to show that humanistic ethics also could be found in the Upanishads (the philosophical Scriptures of Hinduism). In this way he was able to undertake the badly needed reforms of religion and society and to remain loyal to the Hindu tradition.

The Brahmo Society was the first organization outside the Christian Churches that gave attention to the depressed classes. However, Ram Mohan Roy did not regard caste as a major evil and did not take part in any crusade against it.

The great Hindu ally of the missionaries against caste was **Keshub Chandra Sen**. He wrote against caste as angrily as the Christian missionaries but the impact of his words was more effective because the words emanated from a Hindu. Very little is known about Keshub Chandra Sen. However, we do know that Keshab Chandra Sen had a great love for Jesus Christ and a great admiration for Christianity. He studied the Christian religion for 20 years and he was convinced that the New Testament could provide a suitable spiritual foundation for India's progress. In his splendid lectures delivered in Calcutta he raised the idea of establishing a Hindu Church of Christ, a Church fully loyal to Jesus Christ but fully Hindu in culture and in friendly communion with the sister Churches of the West.

A few of his observations against caste follow:

“Next to idolatry and vitally connected with it is caste. The Hindu casteism is a frightful social scourge no one can deny. It has completely and hopelessly wrecked social unity, harmony and happiness and for centuries it has opposed all social progress. As a system of absurd social distinctions it is certainly pernicious. But when we view it on moral grounds it appears as a scandal to conscience and all our moral ideas and sentiments rise to execrate it and to demand its immediate extermination. Caste is the safeguard of Brahmanic priesthood. It is an audacious and sacrilegious violation of God's law of human brotherhood. It makes civil distinctions inviolable divine institutions and in the name of God sows perpetual discord and enmity among its children.”

Unfortunately, Keshub Chandra Sen spoke only to the urban upper caste people and had little contact with the rural masses where the caste rigidities were more evident and stronger. Those who would like to learn more about his ideas and lectures may refer to the book: *“Jesus Christ and the Hindu Community”* by Hans Staffner, S.J.

One of the most prominent figures of the Indian Renaissance was **Swami Vivekananda**. He became very famous as a result of his speech in Chicago where he was the representative of Hinduism at the Parliament of Religions. After his Chicago appearance, he attracted quite a few Western disciples of which Sister Nivedita is the most famous one.

In 1873 Swami Vivekananda founded the famous Ramkrishna Mission which is still operating today in many parts of India and Bangladesh. The activities of Ramkrishna Mission clearly reflect inspiration from Christianity. It provides people with humanitarian social services and its “missionaries” live a type of religious life similar to that of Catholic missionaries. Incidentally, the Ramkrishna Mission is another clear example how the Hindus fight against their enemies by using the same weapons of their enemies.

Swami Vivekananda talks about caste in his writings but his views about it are sometimes contradictory. He gives a justification of the institution of caste as a functional division within an organic society. What he defends in caste is the division of labor but he is silent about the hierarchical principle, about endogamy and the rules governing social intercourse. He states that this good system has become oppressive and must be reformed. He expressed the utopian idea (taken up by Gandhi later on) that all castes should have parity of esteem and he condemned untouchability (like Gandhi) very strongly. The main fault of the caste system, according to Swami Vivekananda, is



that it obstructs social progress and the national feeling, which should be based on a sense of unity and brotherhood.

From the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Hindus became disturbed by the fact that many out caste people were leaving Hinduism to join Christianity through mass movements. Then the academic debate on caste slowed down and the feeling that something had to be done to raise the Untouchables from their degradation started growing. Hindus realized their religion was being threatened by followers converting to other religions so an attempt to make Hinduism more appealing was made.

The pioneer in this new attempt was **Gopal Krisna Gokhale** who founded the “*Society of Servants of India*”. Gokhale called the Indian educated people to work for the uplifting of the depressed castes. He traveled throughout India preaching that for simple reasons of humanity and of national self-interest the system that had kept the Untouchables in their degradation had to be broken. Gandhi met Gokhale a couple of times and admitted to being inspired by him.

Another famous Brahmin who played an important role in the Hindu Renaissance was **Mohadeb Gobindo Ranade**, a Brahmin from Bombay. He founded the “*Prarthana Society*” and attacked the Hindu superstitions such as the custom of burning widows, children’s marriage, and women’s reclusion. He denounced caste as a great evil of Hindu society and preached equality between men. He was the most forceful spokesman for social reforms in Western India. Ranade argued that reform meant the revitalization of Hinduism not its abandonment. His religious organization, Prayer Society, was closely modeled on the Brahmo Society and was influenced by Christian Churches.

The last great social reformer of the Indian Renaissance was **Mahatma Gandhi**. His position about caste was more or less similar to Swami Vivekananda’s ideas. On the caste issue Gandhi appears to have been a very conservative reformer. His ideas on this issue can be found in his articles on this subject collected in a booklet called “*My Varnashradharma*.” He was antagonistic to the present shape of the caste system but he defended “*varnashrama*,” the system of division of labor in society formed on a hereditary basis. According to Gandhi the occupational divisions of society foster co-operation more than competition. He believed all the various occupations are equally useful to society and the work of a scavenger is as respectable as the work of a Brahmin.

Gandhi proved to be a great social reformer as far as untouchability was concerned. He spoke about untouchability as the curse of Hinduism and India. Gandhi was clearly inspired by Christianity in his attempt of social reforms and most probably his strong interest towards the Untouchables was motivated by their mass conversion to Christianity. All his writings on the topic of untouchability have been collected into a book called “*The Removal of Untouchability*.”

Gandhi not only wrote and spoke against untouchability: he also acted against it and personally identified himself with the lowest of the low. Very often he visited the quarters of the Untouchables and shared their lives. Even though, Gandhi invited the high caste Hindus to change their hearts towards the Untouchables but he did not foster any measurable religious, economic or social change among the Untouchables. That’s why many people, including Baba Shaheb Ambedkar, did not accept Gandhi’s strategy towards the Untouchables. Also, the Untouchables were very suspicious about Gandhi’s

position towards them and even today they are very bitter towards him. Evidence of this animosity may be read about in the *Dalit Voice*, the paper edited by the Dalits of India.

Those who are interested in Gandhi's views on untouchability may want to read Father John Fagan's work: "*Mahatma Gandhi's Approach to Untouchability*" (his dissertation for the Licentiate in Missiology) in addition to the myriad of volumes that have been written about Gandhi.

### 3. Return to the roots of Hinduism itself and attempts of self-regeneration

Another response to Christianity, which was challenging Hinduism, came from **Dayananda Swaraswati**, the founder of the Aryan Society in 1875. This social reformer was convinced that Hinduism had whatever was needed to regenerate itself. He felt it was enough to go back to the Vedas, the most ancient Hindu Scriptures and replace the innumerable castes or 'jati' of contemporary Indian society with the four 'varna' of the Scriptures. Each person would find a place in a particular varna according to his gifts and temperament. Dayananda Swaraswati wanted to reform Hinduism without taking anything from external influences. He developed resentment and hatred towards both Christianity and Islam and wanted to "sift" out any ideas from these two religions to bring back a pure Hinduism.

Dayananda Swaraswati laid the foundation of Hindu fundamentalism, which had two very clear programs:

- re-conversion of those who had joined either Christianity or Islam to Hinduism
- strengthening Hinduism as much as possible through the "karma marga" (the way of action), studying the Scriptures, Sanskrit and history of Hindu heroes

His disciple **Gangadhar Tilak** (not to be confused with Narayan Vaman Tilak, a Brahmin from Maharashtra who converted to Christianity and used to say that India would never attain its true greatness without putting the teaching of Christ into practice) preached a militant Hinduism whose main hero is the fighting god Krishna of the Gita. He was a political leader who fought against the British and did not accept Gandhi's principle of non-violence. He considered both Christianity and Islam as the main enemies of Hinduism. As a disciple of Dayananda Swaraswati, Tilak spread the roots of Hinduism fundamentalism.

This fundamentalist movement started by Dayananda Swaraswati and his disciple Tilak was continued by the following Brahmins:

**Vinayak Damodar Savarkar** (1883-1966): the philosopher of "*Hindutva*": a social and political doctrine based on a religious nationalism. He expressed his theories in a book: "*Hindutva: Who Is a Hindu?*"

**Keshav Baliram Hedgewar** (1889-1940): he founded the Hindu militant groups of the '*Sangh Parivar*', such as :Rastriya Swayam Sevak Sang from which year after year more than fifty other militant Hindu organizations sprang out.

**Madhav Sadhasiv Golwalkar** who strengthened the Hindutva ideology with his books: “*Bunch of Thoughts*” and “*We Are Our Nationhood*.”

It appears that these three leaders of the Hindu nationalism were inspired by German Nazism and Italian Fascism which became the models from which the Hindutva ideology, structure and strategy were born. This is ironic as Nazism derived some inspiration from the original precepts of Hinduism and now one evil ideology was feeding its mother!

Another enthusiastic defendant of the caste system was **Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan**. In his books ‘*The Hindu Way of Life*’ and “*Eastern Religions and Western Thoughts*” he defended the contemporary realities of caste against Christian and secular attacks. According to him, caste plays a eugenic role. Moreover the fourfold varna system expresses perennial truths about a healthy social order: spiritual wisdom, executive power, skilled production and devoted service as the indispensable elements of any social order. The fourfold classification is conceived in the interests of world progress. For sure this philosopher’s eyes (who was also President of India) were blurred by his beliefs in the validity of the caste system.

#### 4. Complete rejection and refusal of the Brahminical order

The Indian Renaissance also saw rebels and revolutionary people who completely rejected anything to do with caste, the Brahmanic order, and Hinduism. The most famous rebels are: Jotiba Phule, E.V. Ramaswami-Peryar, Baba Shaheb Ambedkar

Because Baba Shaheb Ambedkar is such a powerful revolutionary leader, an entire chapter will be devoted to him later in the book. This chapter will deal with Phule and Peryar.

**Jotiba Phule** is called the Father of the Indian Revolution. Ambedkar considered him one of his gurus along with Buddha and Kabir. Jotiba Phule was a Shudra of Maharashtra who lived in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. His surname ‘Phule’ came from his caste, the Malis or gardeners by traditional occupation. He was not a real Dalit (Untouchable). He had many followers among the out caste people although his main organizational work was among the middle to low non-Brahman castes of Maharashtra. This group traditionally was known as Shudras and today is given the label of “*bahujan samaj*.” Phule tried to unite the Shudras and the Atishudras (the Untouchables) versus the Brahmanic bureaucracy and their religious order.

Phule began as a social reformer to establish schools for both girls and untouchable boys. He founded the ‘*Satyashodak Samaj*’ in 1875 whose main purpose was to perform rituals without Brahman priests. He also developed a deep interest in the rights of women. Pandita Ramabai probably influenced him as he took a strong position against male patriarchal power as a form of women’s oppression and exploitation. He constantly stressed that education and knowledge are strong weapons for equality and human freedom.

He wrote three books: the first one was on caste, which was to him slavery as brutal as the enslavement of the Blacks in the United States. The second one described the oppression of the peasants and the third one was an effort to outline a new egalitarian religion. He completely rejected Hinduism, which for him was not a religion but only a weapon for domination.

Unfortunately, this rebel and revolutionary leader of the non-Brahmanic castes is still unknown around the world. However, in Maharastra his followers gave him the honorific title of 'Mahatma' (the great soul).

**E. V. Ramswami Naicker** (1879-1973) was a man from South India (Tamil Nadu) who was also known as 'Peryar' (Great Sage). He believed that casteism and Hinduism were one and the same and should be abandoned. Peryar formed the Self-Respect League in 1926 whose purpose was opposition to Brahman priesthood, abolition of caste, and liberation of women. He attacked Hinduism even more than Phule and took an atheistic attitude. His hatred for Brahmins even was expressed in his clothes and his food. He used to wear a black shirt in contrast to the white clothes of the Brahmins and he used to eat every kind of meat in rebellion against the vegetarian diet of the Brahmins.

Peryar started his speeches with these following words:

"There is no god-there is no god-there is no god at all.  
He who invented god is a fool.  
He who propagates god is a scoundrel.  
He who worships god is a barbarian'.

He attacked Hinduism as the tool of Brahmin domination. He saw the Brahmins as the representatives of Hindu arrogance and the stronghold of social injustices."

Peryar tried to destroy the images of Hindu deities as much as he could and ridiculed the Hindu Scriptures as irrational and immoral superstitions. His movement took a turn towards racial consciousness and became a 'Dravidian' movement seeking to defend the non Arian people of South India from the Arian high caste people of the North imposing their Brahmanic culture all over the Indian Subcontinent. Just as Mohammad Ali Jinnah wanted a Pakistan for the Muslims and Ambedkar a Dalitstan for the Untouchables, so Peryar wanted a Dravidstan for the Dravidians and a Hindustan for the Hindus.

When Peryar died at the age of 94, he wanted to be buried rather than cremated as one last dig to Hinduism. The inscription on his tomb says:

"Peryar, the prophet of the new age, the Socrates of South East Asia, father of the social movement, arch-enemy of ignorance, superstitions, meaningless customs and baseless manners."

Even today, the legend of this Socrates of South India attracts many followers and a good number of political parties still derive inspiration from him.

Besides Peryar in South India, four other social reformers attacked the caste system and the Brahmanic order very strongly: their names are:

**Gury Narayan Swami** whose motto was: "*One caste-one religion-one God*;"

**Ayyankali** who emerged as one of two great leaders of the Dalits in Kerala;

**Achutananda** who first attacked the Brahmanic order in Uttar Pradesh;

**Monju Ram** who rebelled against the caste system in Punjab.

## 5. Modern liberal thinking

The Indian Renaissance received a great contribution also from liberal and secularist thinkers like Nehru and Panikkar.

**Jawaharlal Nehru** in his famous book ‘Discovery of India’ wrote:

“Above all the ultimate weakness and failing of the caste system and the Indian social structure were that they degraded a mass of human beings and gave them no opportunities to get out of that condition-educationally, culturally or economically. It led to petrification, which became a dominant feature of India’s economy and life. In the context of society today the caste system and much that goes with it are wholly incompatible, reactionary, restrictive and barriers to progress.” (p. 253)

**K. M. Panikkar** in his books “*Hindu Society at Crossroads*” and “*Caste and Democracy*” echoes Nehru’s ideas. Panikkar believed caste is against the principle of democracy, condemns millions of people to degradation and obstructs education and progress. According to him the only future of Hinduism is its total separation from any form of caste. He felt caste must die and the weapons to kill this monster will be legislation, industrialization and education.

As a conclusive note to this chapter it will be enough to say that two opposite forces are present in today’s Indian social context: the force of *Hindutva* (the Hindu fundamentalism) and the force of the out caste and backward caste (the various Dalit movements).

The Dalit forces are in search of a culture based on social and economic egalitarianism while upper caste Hindus strive for keeping control of the present situation of privileges and dominance by reasserting ancient hierarchical values. The marginalisation of the poor and oppressed Dalits within the Indian Church seems to indicate that the Church is falling victim to the dominant hierarchical ideology of the caste Hindus.

Some of the unchristian things, which happen among our Indian Christian brothers and sisters, will be further explored in the next chapter.

# CHAPTER 10

## UNCHRISTIAN THINGS IN THE INDIAN CHURCH

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As written about earlier in the history of India, the Untouchables (Dalits), who were subjected to severe indignities and inhuman treatment, were attracted to religions like Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. The Christian missionaries in particular provided them with better living conditions and a higher quality of life. There was a change in the converts' way of life but unfortunately the Christian social order remained more or less the same as the Hindu social order. The caste practices continued to affect the life of the Untouchables even though they had converted to Christianity.

The existence of caste practices today in the Christian community has been proved by: Government reports, Sociologists, Church leaders

In 1955, Kaka Kalelkar, Chairperson of the Backward Commission, which submitted the Commission report to the Government of India, made the following observations:

"We discovered with deep pain and sorrow that Indian Christians in many places were still guided by caste, not only in the matter of untouchability, but in social hierarchy of high and low."

In 1965, the government officials of Kerala made the following statement:

"The casteism is practiced widely among the members of Christian fold as judged by the prohibition of social mobility between the members of different castes, intermarriage between them, dining with members of other castes and common work. The caste system, the most archaic but the most powerful social institution in India has also permeated into the Christian religion." (Kumara Pillai Commission Report: 1965)

In 1980, the authors of the famous Mandal Commission Report said:

"Similar is the situation among Indian Christians who are divided into various ethnic groups on the basis of their caste background. The lower caste converts to a very egalitarian religion like Christianity, ever anxious to expand its membership, even after generations were not able to efface the effect of their caste background."

M. N. Srinivas, one of the most famous sociologists of India discovered in his research that in spite of the efforts of the Christian missionaries, conversion to Christianity in India only changed the faith but not the customs: the ranks of a Christian in the local community continues to depend on the caste from which he was converted. Sadly, this persists even to the third or the fourth generations.

Louis Dumont, the famous French sociologist author of "*Homo Hierarchicus*" wrote:

"It is beyond doubt that the Untouchables, in accepting conversion, were often responding to the appeal of an egalitarian religion preached by the powerful but in actual fact their social situation was not improved by it, either in the Hindu milieu nor even the Christian milieu." (p. 203)

Many Christian leaders admit the existence of caste practices in the Christian communities. For example, in 1983, attendees to the CBCI (Catholic Bishops' Conference of India) issued this statement:

"The caste mentality is still present also in the Christian communities. Where converts from different castes live together in the same parish or diocese a sense of equality does not always prevail among them. In several places even after generations of Christian life each group keeps its identity and try to perpetuate it."

The famous leader of the Church of South India (a United Protestant Church), Bishop M. Azariah made these observations:

"The Dalit Christians are discriminated against and oppressed by fellow Christians within the various churches for no fault of their own but the accident of birth, even when they are the second, third or fourth generation Christians. The high caste Christians who are in a minority in the Church carry their caste prejudices even after generations, unaffected by Christian belief and practice." (The Un-Christian Side of the Indian Church, p. 10)

It is important to note that even though caste practices exist in Christianity, they are not comparable with the caste practices among the Hindus. Caste practices in Christianity are not legitimized by religion as happens in Hinduism. Unfortunately, caste practices do survive even in a Christian environment!

The Dalit Christians suffer from three kinds of discrimination:

- discrimination from the Government
- discrimination from the Hindu Society
- discrimination from the high caste Christians

Dalit Christians feel the first form of discrimination from the Indian Government which denies them the privileges granted to the Hindu Dalits on the grounds that as Christians they are no longer disadvantaged since Christianity does not admit a caste system. According to the original Scheduled Castes Order set up by the Indian Government before the Independence only the Dalits Hindus were entitled to get protective (or reversed) discrimination. Then, in 1956, the government included the converts to Sikhism into the Scheduled Castes Order and in 1990 the act was expanded to add the converts to Buddhism. However, so far neither the Dalit Christians nor the Dalit Muslims have been included in the list of the Scheduled Castes Order. So in order to be eligible for the State's protective discrimination the Dalits must remain Hindus or be Sikh or Buddhist.

This is blatant religious discrimination against Christians and Muslims, which violates the principle of secularism of the Indian Constitution. It would seem this denial of 'Scheduled Castes Status' both to the Christian Dalits and the Muslim Dalits is the best way to prevent out caste-Untouchables from joining either Christianity or Islam.

Understandably, both Christian Dalits and Muslim Dalits are objecting to this kind of discrimination from the Government and things may change for the better in future.

In addition to legal Government discrimination, the Dalits continue to suffer from caste discrimination within the main stream of the Hindu society. Indian society remains a caste-ridden society. Caste prejudices are very deep rooted in society so when a Dalit embraces a casteless religion like Christianity or Islam, he/she is still placed in the same position in the caste hierarchy and the mark of ritual pollution which he or she carries on with his/her ontological being just follows him/her into the new religion.

Officials writing the Mandal Commission Report (1980) observed:

“Even after conversion the lower castes converts were continued to be treated as ‘Harijans’ by all sections of the society.” (p. 55)

The third source of discrimination stems from the high caste Christians that should be considered the worst one since Biblical principles are violated by this behavior. To be fair, the extent and rigor of caste discrimination in the Christian Churches vary from place to place and from Church to Church. Caste discrimination is more evident and stronger in South India than in North India where Christian communities are more homogeneous.

A detailed research conducted by the Jesuits on the discriminatory practices in both Catholic and Protestant Churches in Tamil Nadu has revealed how far away our Indian Christian devotees are from the Gospel values. The following are some forms of discrimination reported by the Jesuit Priest Antony Raj in his report on “Discrimination against Dalit Christians in Tamil Nadu:”

1. The construction of two chapels, one for the non-Dalits and the other one for the Dalits. In some parishes liturgical services are conducted separately.
2. Separate seating arrangements are made within the same chapel. Dalits are usually seated in the two aisles of the Church. Even if there are benches or chairs the Dalits are asked to take their seats on the floor.
3. The existence of two separate cemeteries and two separate hearses to carry the dead bodies are found.
4. Two separate queues are formed to receive the sacred body of Christ. In some places Dalits are asked to receive communion after the non-Dalits.
5. It is forbidden for a Dalit to be an altar boy or a lector at the sacred liturgy.
6. The non-Dalits restrict the Corpus Domini procession, Palm Sunday procession and other procession only to their streets.
7. Dalits are not invited to participate in the washing of feet ceremony during Holy Thursday.
8. For fear of equal participation in the celebration of the feast of the parish patron saint, the parish council decides not to ask any contribution from the Dalits.



- 9.** The feast of the village patron saint is celebrated separately.
- 10.** In Christian villages the Dalit colony is distinct and separated from the upper caste settlement and all the social facilities such as the hospital and the schools are located in the area of the caste Christians.
- 11.** The Dalits are denied participation in the Church choir and are not allowed to enter the Sanctuary.
- 12.** When Sacraments such as baptism, confirmation and marriage are administered the Dalit Christians have to receive them only after the upper castes have been served.
- 13.** If arrangements for separate cemeteries are not made the Dalit Christians are allotted a different corner of the main cemetery and sometimes a wall separates the two groups.
- 14** Interdining is a sacrilege and intermarriage is unheard of. Caste Christians do not enter the houses of the Dalit Christians. During marriages in upper castes settlements Dalit Christians are given food outside the house where the wedding ceremony takes place.
- 15.** Caste Christians never attend weddings in Dalit settlements. Marriages or funeral processions are banned from passing through the streets of the upper caste people.
- 16.** In some places, marriages of upper caste couples are blessed near the sanctuary and those of the Dalits on the wing of the Church.
- 17.** Dalit teachers address their upper caste pupils with the honorific form while the pupil addresses the teacher with the ordinary form.
- 18.** Parish priests do not offer a seat even to an educated Dalit while a student from an upper caste may be asked to sit.  
In spite of their numerical strength as members of the Church, the Dalit Christians do not have any power either in the administration matters of the Church or its leadership.
- 19.** Given their overwhelming numerical preponderance, a high percentage of Dalit priests would be expected but Dalit vocations to priesthood and religious life are discouraged.
- 20.** Father Anthony Raj has also recorded some cases of ill treatment to Dalit pastors by the dominant caste Christian communities.
- 21.** There is the denial of educational and employment opportunities to the Dalits in Church run organizations and institutions.

22. More money is spent to enlarge the infrastructures of the Church than the development of the Dalits. More churches are built and new rectories are constructed and dispensaries and hospitals are proliferating but those who benefit from these services are high caste Christians.

23. The Dalits feel that the Church has been indifferent to their poverty and misery. Most of them live in small huts exposed to all types of unhygienic conditions and a huge percentage of them live below the poverty line while their pastors live in opulence and extravagance.

24. Church authorities are very busy to control the growth of Dalit Christian Movements.

25. Dalit priests are warned by the Bishop not to participate in Dalit meetings and conventions.

26. Dalit teachers working in Diocesan schools are threatened with dire consequences if they participate in Dalit conventions

27. Bishops writes pastoral letters exhorting the Dalit faithful not to participate in Dalit movements and conventions.

28. Church authorities request Government authorities and the police force to bring pressure on the Dalit leaders to cancel meetings and conventions...

29. In order to control the rebel Dalits sometimes church authorities seem to move towards Mafia models of behavior.

The list of the various forms of discrimination against the Dalit Christians goes on. Also, we must remember Tamil Nadu is not the only place where Dalit Christians are so ill treated. Discrimination against Dalit Christians exists also in other Indian States and what is shocking is that caste attitudes, behavior and consciousness sometimes are stronger among priests and nuns than lay persons.

It has also been found out that caste consciousness is stronger among the younger priests, scholastics and seminarians than among older priests who may have spent part of their life working among Dalit Christians. There seem to be a relatively large number of upper caste priests who take an active part in caste associations. Moreover the leadership of the upper caste persons take the caste system for granted. Being brought up in the system, very few high caste Christians question it. They view it only as a social system and not a moral question that Christianity should deal with.

In order to make at least religious congregations aware of all these unchristian behaviors of the Indian Church the famous Jesuit **M. Amaladoss** has proposed a fourth vow for the Religious in India: 'the vow of communion' which implies a renunciation of caste. This is what M.Amaladoss has written:

"Such a commitment (vow of communion) will be really counter cultural and prophetic in a relevant way for the Christian and the wider community in India. It will be a following of Jesus who broke down the wall of separation between the Jew

and the Gentile, reached out the ostracized Samaritans and befriended the out caste publicans. If love of the other is really the basic new commandment of Jesus then its breach in the practice of caste is more serious than the temptations of money, sex and self will. The vow of community also brings out the social dimension and implications of religious life more clearly than the traditional three vows. A vow will not automatically and dramatically solve the discriminations of the caste system. But taking a vow of community would mean that people who opt to become Religious will be conscientised during early formation about the importance of community and the evils of the caste system.” (*A Call to Community*, p. 138)

The Church in Bangladesh may not be as sinful as the Indian Church in regard to Christian brotherhood and sisterhood but since the cultural background is the same, our Bangladeshi Christians are not free from casteism. In the Diocese of Khulna it appears that the virus of caste is quite strong and it seems to be stronger among the priests than among the lay people.

So far, nobody acknowledges the problem but sooner or later it will be necessary to look into this serious matter if we want peace and justice among our Christian people and their Bangladeshi Pastoral leaders.

# CHAPTER 11

## THE NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF THE CASTE SYSTEM

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As with every social institution, naturally the caste system has attracted many enthusiastic supporters and also has created a good number of strong opponents. This chapter will report the observations of the famous French missionary Abbè Dubois who discovered many positive things in the caste system and the observations of Baba Shaheb Ambedkar who considered the caste system to be the primary disaster or impediment to the Indian civilization.

Dubois wrote in his famous book “*Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*”:

“I believe caste division to be in many respects the chef d’oeuvre, the happiest effort of Hindu legislation. I am persuaded that it is simply and solely due to the distribution of the people into castes that India did not lapse into a state of barbarism. I do not consider caste to be free from many great drawbacks but I believe that the resulting advantages more than outweigh the resulting evils” (p. 28)

According to this famous writer, Indian civilization functioned only because of the caste system, which fosters a strong sense of duty, obedience and discipline. Without the framework of the caste system, the undisciplined nature of the people of the Indian Subcontinent would have turned their country into an unbridled society according to the thinking of Dubois.

In addition, Abbè Dubois praises division of labor as something quite beneficial for the nature of the Hindus. He states:

“The legislators of India set out from that cardinal principle that no person should be useless to the commonwealth. At the same time they recognized that they were dealing with a people who were indolent and careless by nature and whose propensity to be apathetic was so aggravated by the climate in which they lived that unless every individual had a profession or employment rigidly imposed upon him the social fabric could not hold together” (page 30).

Moreover, the French missionary saw the authoritative rules of the caste system as the best way to keep good order in a country where the power of the state or the government was quite weak.

Additionally, Abbè Dubois argued that it is to caste distinctions that India owes the preservation of her arts and industries. Since a member of a particular caste must continue with the traditional occupation of the group, the secrets of a specific art or industry or a trade are passed down from generation to generation.

Furthermore, Abbè Dubois says something about the political advantages resulting from caste distinctions:

“In India parental authority is but little respected. Outward affection appears to exist between brothers and sisters but in reality is neither strong nor very sincere. Thus, since the ties of blood relationship form such an insecure bond between different members of a community, which is not guaranteed any mutual assistance and support as needed, it became necessary to bring families together in large caste communities. This gave the individual members a common interest in protecting, supporting and defending each other” (p. 36).

As much as the French missionary was an enthusiastic supporter of the caste system, Baba Shaheb Ambedkar was its fiercest opponent, attacker and enemy. Baba Shaheb Ambedkar expressed his views on the detrimental effects of the caste system in a speech he prepared for a conference organized by upper caste Hindus in 1936. As one might have expected, the speech was not delivered due to the cancellation of the conference by the Reception Committee on the grounds that the views expressed in the speech would be unbearable to those attending the conference.

Later on, the speech was turned into a booklet and translated into the predominant Indian languages: Gujarati, Tamil, Marathi, Hindi, Punjabi, Malayalam and Bengali. Many people, including Gandhi, criticized Ambedkar's views as expressed in his speech. In his speech, Ambedkar wanted to make the upper caste Hindus realize that they were the sick men of India and that their sickness was causing danger to the health and happiness of other Indians.

The title of this speech, which became famous is: “*Annihilation of Caste*”. In this discourse, Ambedkar tried to study the areas in which the caste system failed miserably. According to him the failure of the system has been *economic, biological, moral, social*.

**Economic failure.** Hinduism is probably the only religion in the world, which lays down a well-articulated framework of economic relations for various castes or groups. Division of labor is one of the main features of the caste system and the Hindu social order. Ambedkar studied this economic base of Hinduism and reached the conclusion that both as a producers' organization and a scheme of distribution the caste system has failed miserably. The way of production as it is organized under the caste system did not advance for centuries and distribution of wealth and income is based on immense inequality. Therefore the system perpetuates inescapable poverty.

Division of labor based on fixation and hereditary occupation is against personal freedom. An individual is bound to his occupation. Therefore it leaves no scope for individual choice and individual inclination. This system denies people the right to cultivate vital interests. This division of labor is not spontaneous and is not based on natural attitudes. Therefore, it prevents personal initiative. In a dynamic industrial setup, an individual must be free to choose his/her occupation. Social and religious restrictions on inter-occupational mobility create unemployment. By not allowing inter-occupational mobility of labor, capital and entrepreneurship this economic system brings a high level of inefficiency.

Division of labor creates division of laborers. The various groups become anti-social and inimical towards one another because on the hierarchical ladder one is superior and the other is inferior. Moreover, considering that some caste occupations are

thought to be degrading creates a sense of aversion of those engaged in them and a constant desire to escape from such occupations. The problem is that there is no mechanism to escape thus causing one to feel a lifetime of being trapped.

*“What efficiency can there be in a system under which neither men’s hearts nor their minds are in their work?”* asked Ambedkar. Furthermore, the dignity of labor is absent in the general scheme of the theory of caste. People are taught to look down on manual labor. Those who have to dirty their hands to earn their livelihood get neither respect nor human dignity.

Ambedkar’s conclusion is that *“as an economic organization caste is a harmful institution because it involves the subordination of man’s natural powers and inclinations to the exigencies of social rules.”* (*Writings and speeches*, vol. 1, p. 47)

The second principle of caste-based economics is inequality of distribution of benefits. This inequality creates an unjust economic order according to which those who are the top of the social ladder have everything and those who are at the bottom have nothing. Plus is added to plus and minus to minus. The Shudra gets nothing in this economic division of caste except the duty to serve high castes. As property rights are concerned Hinduism leaves no scope for Shudras to accumulate wealth. After employing the Shudras’ services, the three high castes are not obliged to provide adequate economic security to them.

The Ati-Shudra or Untouchables are the group of people who have had to suffer more under this unjust economic order. The economic system of caste has produced disastrous consequences for them. They had no access to sources of income and no right to property. They were not allowed to use their labor for their own upliftment but only to serve the high castes. They could not undertake trade or enter military service.

Ambedkar argued that the weak in Europe had in their possession the physical weapon of military service, a political weapon of organization and a moral weapon in education. These three rights were denied to the masses of India by the caste system. As a result the Untouchables not only were crippled but also completely crushed by this inhuman system.

**Biological failure.** Those who defend the caste system say that it is the best way to preserve purity of race and purity of blood. It seems that a lot of nonsense is spouted about heredity and eugenics in defense of the caste system. Scientists agree about improvement of the human race through cross breeding and interracial marriages and those who try to give caste an eugenetic basis should have a look at the fruits it has produced. Ambedkar says that the Hindus physically speaking are very far away from being strong: “they are dwarfs in stature and wanting in stamina”. For example, Ambedkar points out, “The Hindus are a nation 9/10 of which is declared to be unfit for military service.” (*Writings and speeches*, vol. 1, p. 50)

**Social failure.** According to Ambedkar another harmful result of the caste system is a complete disorganization of the Hindu social life. The Hindus were not even able to give a name to themselves because they had no idea of a united race. The name Hindu

was given by the Muslims when they entered the Indian Subcontinent. This is what Ambedkar says:

“Hindu society as such does not exist. It is only a collection of castes. Castes do not even form a federation. A caste has no feeling that is affiliated to other castes except when there is a Hindu-Muslim riot. On all other occasions each caste endeavors to segregate itself and to distinguish itself from other castes. Each caste not only dines among itself and marries among itself but each caste prescribes its own distinctive dress (probably not anymore). Indeed the ideal Hindu must be like a rat living in his own hole refusing to have any contact with others. That is the reason why the Hindus cannot be said to form a society or a nation. The caste system prevents common activity and by preventing common activity it has prevented the Hindus from becoming a society with a unified life and consciousness of its own being.” (*Writings and speeches*, Vol. 1, p. 51)

In his deep analysis of the social disaster created by caste, Ambedkar further points out that another negative effect of the system is an anti-social spirit among the various castes. One caste enjoys singing a hymn of hate against another caste. Members of one caste attempt to give a noble origin to their own caste and an ignoble origin to other castes. This anti-social spirit poisons the mutual relations among the various castes whose only concern is to protect their own interests.

“The Hindus therefore are not only an assortment of castes but they are so many warring groups each living for itself and for its selfish ideals.” (id., Vol. 1, p. 52)

Then in his study about the detrimental effects of caste Ambedkar goes on asking why in India there are so many aboriginal tribes that still remain in a primitive uncivilized situation in a land which boasts of a civilization thousands of years old. Oddly enough, it appears that the Hindus have never felt ashamed of this savage state of these tribal people. Why has no attempt been made to civilize these aborigines? The Hindus have always blamed their backwardness but have never made any effort to civilize them, to give them medical help, and to transform them into good citizens. In order to civilize the aborigines one would have to love them but what the higher caste Hindus are concerned about is preserving their castes and the status quo. They have no sense of duty towards fallen humanity so the tribal people just go on with their backwardness century after century.

Ambedkar points out the uncaring attitude of the higher castes in this statement:

“Not only have the Hindus made no effort for the humanitarian cause of civilizing the savages but the higher caste Hindus have deliberately prevented the lower castes who are within the pale of Hinduism from rising to the cultural level of the higher castes”. (id. Vol. 1, p. 53)

Ambedkar spent his life studying the miseries and indignities the Untouchables of India had and still have to suffer from and for which high caste Hindus were and are responsible. Among the volumes of Ambedkar’s writings and speeches, Volume No. 5 deals completely with the Untouchables or the Children of India’s ghetto.

Then Ambedkar goes on to say that while all adherents of the other great religions are eager and busy with self-propagation, Hinduism is not a missionary religion at all.

The main reason for this is caste. Caste is inconsistent with conversion. You would have to find a place for the new convert which would create the dilemma of which caste would you place him or her? Unlike a club, the membership of a caste is not open to all and there is no authority anywhere to compel a caste to admit a newcomer to its social life. As long as castes remain, Hinduism can not become a missionary religion.

The worst social effect of the caste system is that it destroys the possibility of 'sanghatan' (strong organization) which is present among Muslims. The strength of the Muslims comes from their sense of unity and brotherhood. When a Muslim is in danger, other Muslims will rush to save him. The Hindus do not enjoy this sense of solidarity because they live in isolation and therefore remain powerless. Being powerless, they develop timidity and cowardice and in order to protect themselves they adopted deceitful ways using skills of treachery and cunning. Strength comes from unity! The Hindus are divided so it is no wonder two Muslims are equal to a crowd of Hindus. As long as caste remains, there will be no 'sanghatan' and without 'sanghatan' the Hindus will remain weak and powerless.

Often it is said, one's strength is also one's weakness. According to Ambedkar, the much-praised tolerance of the Hindus comes from their weakness and powerlessness.

**Moral failure** is another result of the caste system as delineated by Ambedkar:

"The effect of caste on the ethics of the Hindus is simply deplorable....  
Caste has killed public spirit....  
Caste has destroyed the sense of public charity...  
Virtue has become caste ridden and morality has become caste bound...  
There is no sympathy to the deserving...  
There is no appreciation of the meritorious...  
There is no charity to the needy...  
There is charity but it begins with the caste and ends with the caste...  
There is sympathy but not for men of other castes...  
My caste man, right or wrong....my caste man, good or bad...  
It is not a case of standing by virtue and not standing by vice....  
It is a case of standing or not standing by the caste...  
(*Writings and speeches*, Vol. 1, p. 57)

It should appear clear that these results impede human development of the masses. I am sure that those who have tried to facilitate advancement among the people of this country must have experienced how difficult it is to get people to cooperate and work together, whatever religious affiliation they belong to. Selfishness, dishonesty, and individualistic attitudes spoil and ruin any attempt to improve people's situation. The main difficulties for human development in this country seem to stem from people's behavior and mindset.

Concerning this topic, a very interesting book was published fifteen years ago. The name of the book is '*Poverty and Behavior in Bangladesh*' written by Dr. Clarence Maloney, an American anthropologist. Dr. **Maloney** worked on various development projects in this country and was able to observe Bangladeshi people's mental attitudes and behavior. Sociologists and anthropologists usually explain poverty in Bangladesh



from the point of view of economics, resources, population growth and natural disasters. However, for the first time, in Dr. Maloney's book people's behavior was highlighted as an important reason for poverty and under development. Dr. Maloney does not deny the economic and demographic explanations but says that behavior is the raw material, which produces these economic and social phenomena.

Prior to the publication of this book, nobody tried to identify specific qualities of behavior that cause poverty in so large a part of population. All non-southeast Asian people who want to work in this country should have a look at this book. I am sure that most of the expatriates who have had a little bit of working experience in Bangladesh will fully agree with what Dr. Maloney has written in his book.

The behavioral causes behind persisting poverty in Bangladesh according to Dr. Maloney are:

- hierarchy and Patronage
- Bengali Pragmatic Individualism
- issues of Trust-Guilt and Duty

The author deals with these behavioral causes in the third chapter of the book. Dr. Maloney explains that interpersonal relations are based on the principle of hierarchy established according to wealth, lineage, education, and rank of employment and age. A person accorded a higher rank is given the right to receive service and respect from a lower ranking person but at the same time, the lower ranking person feels entitled to get some kind of patronage in return from the higher ranking person. The high ranking person is supposed to be an indulgent person who shows '*daya*' (grace-blessing) towards those who show him respect and serve him. The prosperity of an individual or a group comes from the indulgence of an important person whose virtues are extolled by the lower ranking people.

In daily life, this pattern of behavior is visible everywhere. Even or especially, government officials behave according to this pattern! The officials are expected to profit from their position but they are supposed to extend their patronage and indulgence (*daya*) to their servants. The pattern is even followed by the NGOs working in Bangladesh. NGO employees were supposed to break down this kind of social relationship but it appears that they have not been able to eradicate this centuries old system of behavior. In the past, landlords and '*mahajans*' (moneylenders) gave patronage. Now patronage is given by NGOs. Sadly, this social pattern affects our missionary activities since many missionaries fall into the trap of becoming 'patrons' very easily.

According to Dr. Maloney, another tendency in Bengali culture is something termed "*personalization of authority*." Landlords and mahajans displayed profusely this behavior which is learned from day to day relationships with high-ranking people such as the head of the family, elder brother, village leaders, teachers etc. Personalized authority becomes more important than the organization or the institution represented by that authority who seems to know only the first personal pronoun when he/she talks. Thus, the good of the group is sacrificed for the good of the authority at the top.

According to Dr. Maloney this behavioral pattern of hierarchy-patronage-expectation and authoritarianism has various detrimental effects on the development

process. One is the seeking of patronage prevents personal initiative and creates passivity.

‘The one armed beggar who could certainly work with his good arm is made by society feel that he is entitled to patronage. The day laborer expects from his farmer employer that he see after his needs. The farmer expects the Government to give loans. All the rural people expect that if elected officials are good at their job they will manage to command goodies from the Government and distribute them downward. The Government itself expects patronage from the rich nations. The world expects prosperity from the indulgence of Allah.’ (*Poverty and behavior in Bangladesh*, p. 48)

Personalization of authority and statement of hierarchy leads to weakness of institutions.

‘It leads to frequent fluctuation of policy in administration, reversal and countermanding of decisions and consequent demoralization of the stuff.... Employees who are sincere in their work give up after a while.... It is therefore difficult to build up intrinsically solid institutions’. (id., p. 49)

Dr. Maloney continues by exploring the topic of Bengali pragmatic individualism. Bengali people are extremely opportunistic in their behavior. They cannot seem to work together very easily because they do not trust each other. Moreover, they have a concept of guilt and duty quite different from the one, which is bound up with the Judeo-Christian tradition. The results of this different concept of guilt and duty are decline of public morality and inefficiency and stagnation and death of the various social institutions.

At this point, the simple question could be asked: “Where have these features of Bengali behavior come from?” After reading Dr. Ambedkar’s “*Annihilation of Caste*,” it appears that the negative effects of the caste system and the main features of Bengali social behaviors are almost the identical. Therefore, we could reach the conclusion that the social behavior of the Bengali people is a fruit of the caste system even though Dr. Maloney never directly claims this to be true. Hierarchy and patronage are the main pillars of the caste system. The caste system provides advantages both to those who are high and those who are low on the social ladder. High-ranking people get respect, honor and service from low ranking people who in return are helped to survive. But the system just perpetuates that ‘begging mentality’ which disturbs Western people so much. The begging mentality goes together with the tendency of the Bengali people to lean on high-ranking people. Thus self-sufficiency is not encouraged as the dependent ones expect the patrons to solve their problems as well as take care of them in exchange for cheap or slave labor. According to this mentality, very poor people are not those who have nothing but those who have none to rely and lean on: those who do not have patrons. That is why in Bangladesh, a poor person will not say: “I have nothing.” He/she will say: “I have nobody”.

Joseph **Divine** has studied this kind of behavior in depth. In order to have a better understanding of the Bengali characteristic of always looking for somebody to lean on, the third chapter of Joseph Divine’s research should be studied. The title of the research study is : “*One Foot in Each Boat, the Macro politics and Micro Sociology of NGOs in*

*Bangladesh*” and the specific chapter to look at is “*The Local Significance of NGOs: Making Relationships Work*”.

In addition to all of the above devastating effects of the caste system, perhaps, the worst damage has been the psychological effect, which affects people’s behavior. This topic needs an entire chapter devoted to it which will be done later in this book.

# CHAPTER 12

## AT THE BOTTOM OF INDIAN SOCIETY

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Dr. Ambedkar said that in human history, three social groups have been marginalized, oppressed and discriminated against. These groups are:

- the Jewish because of their religion
- the black people because of the color of their skin
- the Untouchables of India for their 'impure' occupations

The Jewish people have been given their ancestral homeland and a nation to govern as they see fit primarily based on religious heritage. Although this world will never be free of antisemitic feelings, the Jewish people have gained freedom and security in the nation state of Israel. Today, throughout most of the world, black people enjoy the same rights and are subject to the same laws as white people. Even when discrimination does flare up, the rights of blacks are protected by and large. However, the Untouchables of India are still struggling and fighting for their dignity and basic human rights.

The famous Dutch missionary/anthropologist **Stephen Fucks** (whom will be dealt with at a later point) wrote a very interesting book in which he tried to give an enumeration and a short characterization of all the various groups of Untouchables living in the Indian Subcontinent. His valuable book titled "*At the Bottom of Indian Society*", deals with the worst effect of the caste system: untouchability! Hence the title of Fucks' book was borrowed for this chapter which deals with the same topic. In this chapter something will be said about those who are at the bottom of Indian Society: the Untouchables and their various names; why they have become Untouchables; and what Hindu Scriptures say about them.

### 1. Various names of the Untouchables

To be an Untouchable in the Indian caste system is to occupy a very low position in the hierarchical social order. The Untouchables are underprivileged social groups who, though their occupations are economically indispensable for the greater society, are nevertheless treated as impure and consequently compelled to live on the fringes of society (both physically and psychologically). They make up about 16 per cent of the Indian population and their total number is approximately 150 million people.

The Untouchables have been called by various names such as:

- *Untouchables*: not to be touched since they are considered impure
- *Harijans*: a glorified term coined by a South Indian novelist who used it for the children born out of illicit relationship between Brahmins and temple prostitutes (the famous devadashis or servants of the gods). The term was adopted and popularized by Mahatma Gandhi but recently has been completely rejected by the Untouchables themselves.

- *Pariahs*: term derived from the Tamil word “parai” which means drum. The same word was used to name a group of Untouchables whose occupation was to play the drum.
- *Outcastes*: people not included in the Brahmanic social order.

In ancient times and in the Hindu Scriptures the following names were used:

- *Chandala*: used by the Manu Smriti, the book of the first Hindu counter-revolution.
- *Panchama*: the fifth group after the four classical castes recorded in the Scriptures.
- *Avarna*: people outside the four ‘varnas’.
- *Atishudras*: those below the Shudras.
- *Antyaja*: those at the end (bottom) of the society.
- *Acchut*: those who must not be touched

Once the British appeared on the subcontinent scene they gave the Untouchables the following names:

- *E. C.* meaning Exterior or external castes. The famous anthropologist J. H. Hutton used this name for the first time.
- *D. C.* meaning Depressed castes.
- *S. C.* meaning Scheduled Castes. This term appeared for the first time in 1935 and was used to list all the backward groups rejected by high caste Hindus because of their ritual impurity.
- *O. B. C.* meaning Other Backward Castes

At the same time the term *S. T.* appeared. *S. T.* stands for ‘*Scheduled Tribes*’ and the term was used to list all the primitive tribes living in remote and inaccessible hills or forests, ethnically different from the rest of the Indian population and having nothing to do with the Brahmanic order.

In addition to the names given by those outside of the untouchable groups, there are a few new names, which the Untouchables have discovered on their own and have become quite popular such as:

- *Shoshito*: oppressed
- *Adi Dravidians*: non-Aryans, belonging to the Dravidian group, the aborigines of India
- *Bohujan*: the masses of India
- *Dalit*: term first used in journalistic writings as far back as 1931 to denote the Untouchables. The label became very popular around the 70s with the Dalit Panthers Movement in Maharashtra and the Dalit Literature. Currently, the term is used throughout the Indian Subcontinent and has replaced all the other names for the Untouchables. As it is now used, it implies a condition of being underprivileged and deprived of basic rights and refers to people who are suppressed on account of their lowly birth.

## 2. Nature of untouchability

Without a doubt, untouchability is the worst effect of the caste system. According to the Brahmanic order the Untouchables are unclean, dirty and polluted human beings and as such their only place is at the lowest level of the social ladder. Although the Un-

touchables are anxious to conform to the laws and regulations of the Hindu religion and would like to be integrated into it, they are rejected by Hindu society because of the religion and tradition.

Ancient Hindu law has forbidden all social contact with the Untouchables. Higher-ranking Hindus are not supposed to have any kind of association with this group. Caste Hindus are not even allowed to accept food and water from an Untouchable since his touch is polluting. Thus even his nearness is often sufficient to defile a man belonging to a high caste. He is not allowed to have access to public places such as restaurants, teashops, barbers' shops, schools etc. He is not allowed to acquire knowledge about religion and in many places, is still prevented from entering temples and places of worship.

Obviously, an untouchable has no rights: only the duty to submit to any order given by high caste Hindus. He is mercilessly exploited, socially degraded and humiliated, forced to live in unhealthy conditions and often deprived of the essential human commodities. He is taught to accept his lot without complaining as the fruit of his 'karma' or the results of his misdeeds in his previous life.

The situation of the Untouchables has changed much for the better in modern times but many kinds of discrimination and oppression still continue. Much of the problem is due to the mindset of adherents to Hinduism and due to centuries of tradition, which still place utmost importance on which caste you belong to and all the baggage that accompanies your caste label.

Certainly, the problem of untouchability is a curse for its victims as it keeps the untouchables at a sub-human level. However, untouchability has also become a problem for the high caste Hindus in more enlightened times. Along with degrading Hinduism, this evil institution is wrong, unjust, unreasonable and harmful to the entire Indian nation.

Those who work for the abolition of untouchability must also try to bring about a change of heart among high caste Hindus and convince them that a change of the social structure of Indian society would be beneficial to everybody. It appears that the problem of untouchability has not been tackled sufficiently from this angle. Mahatma Gandhi was a trendsetter in this regard but much has been left undone!

Untouchability is a disease of Hinduism and the superior castes of which they need to be cured. The history of Indian society is full of attempts by reformers to abolish or at least to mitigate the rigors of the caste system and untouchability. All the new religions that appeared in the Indian Subcontinent fought against these two monsters of caste and untouchability but neither social nor religious reformers have been able to eradicate them.

It is possible that attempts from both social and religious reforms are not strong enough. Perhaps, some kind of a French Revolution might be needed. Dr. Ambedkar dreamed about such a Revolution in India and the ideal society he envisioned for India was based on the three pillars of the French Revolution: liberty-equality-fraternity! Will such a Revolution ever happen in India?

### 3. Theories about the origin of Untouchability in India

Where did untouchability originate? What are the factors that must have contributed to the growth of this terrible social phenomenon which in this extreme form is found only in Hindu India? Some of the various theories that have been proposed for its origin are:

#### **A. Racial theory**

This theory traces the origins of untouchability to the Aryans and to their way of relating to the aborigines of India with whom they came into contact. Conquered by the Aryans' superior military technology, some of these indigenous people withdrew into forests and jungles and became the 'tribal people' of India, while others were incorporated into Aryan society as separate and inferior castes. These incorporated castes were the ancestors of the 'Untouchables'.

The ancient Scriptures talk about the *Chandals* as people kept on the fringes of Aryan society. In Kautilya's *Arthashastra* (Kautilya is the Macchiavelli of India) and in the Scriptures called *Dharmasutras* (which were probably written between 600 B.C and 200 AD) these Chandals are treated as Untouchables and the 'mixed caste theory' is born.

#### **B. Manu's theory**

The mixed caste theory is further developed by Manu in the odious book of laws we talked a great deal about: the *Manu Smriti*. According to Manu, the ancient Indian lawgiver, untouchability is the punishment for miscegenation between a member of a high caste and that of a low caste or outcaste. The offspring of such mixtures become untouchables. Untouchability is more severe if the mother is from a superior caste. Therefore inter-caste marriage or relationships is the origin of untouchability (*Manu Smriti*, 10: 6-10)

#### **C. J. H. Hutton's theory**

This eminent anthropologist believes that untouchability is the consequence of ritual impurity associated with polluting activities. A washerman for example is considered impure because his work has to deal with unclean things. And in the same way those who are busy with 'dirty' works become somehow 'dirty' people and therefore are marked with the stigma of impurity and untouchability.

#### **D. C. Von Furer-Haimendorf's theory**

This anthropologist believes that untouchability is an urban development and is the result of an unclean and ritually impure occupation. (See his forward to the book by Dr. Stephen Fuchs '*The Children of Hari*'). This anthropologist does not accept the racial theory about the origin of untouchability because he can not see any particular biological difference between out caste and caste Hindus. According to him, untouchability was not born in rural areas because village people are not much different from one another. He maintains that differences exist among town people: wealthy urban people live in luxurious settlements and poor urban people are compelled to serve them and live in miserable conditions. Moreover in order to survive they are obliged to do all kinds of dirty work thus causing them to be kept at a distance from the rich people and to be considered impure and untouchable. Once untouchability had developed in urban

or semi urban settlements, its gradual spread to the villages was inevitable because new fashions usually emanate from the urban areas.

#### **E. Dr. Ambedkar's theory**

This theory can be found in one of the books, which is a collection of Dr. Ambedkar's writings and speeches. The name of the book is: "*Who were the Sudras: who were the Untouchables?*"

Dr. Ambedkar believes there is no racial difference between the Hindus and the Untouchables. The Untouchables had the same Aryan blood but they were poor nomadic people (Ambedkar calls them 'Broken Men'). The rich Aryans employed them as defenders of their settlements and in return for their services they were given protection but were not allowed to stay within the settlement. They were kept at a distance and treated with disrespect. Gradually, these broken men adopted Buddhism as their religion and they refused to give up beef eating. For these reasons, the broken men became objects of even more disrespect and hatred. Therefore economic dependence of the broken men on the rich Aryans added to contempt for their religion and their dietary habits was the root of Untouchability.

#### **F. Dr. Stephen Fuch's theory**

This great missionary/anthropologist proposed a new theory regarding the origin of Untouchability. According to him, the Aryans were warriors and herders who did not like cultivation and regarded manual work of any kind as unworthy for a shepherd and a warrior. All manual work, which had to be done, was assigned either to slaves or to craftsmen. In spite of their usefulness, these craftsmen were not only despised for their manual services: they were also socially segregated. They had to live at some distance and were not allowed to build their huts near the tents of the animal breeders. Intermarriages also were forbidden. According to Dr. Fuchs' findings this contemptible attitude towards manual work is still present among members of herding communities in Asia and Africa.

### **4. Historical roots of the Dalits**

None of the above theories about the origin of Untouchability can be conclusively proven. The theory, which seems to have the most strength and is embraced by most of the Untouchables of India, is the racial theory. This theory could be useful to trace the historical roots of the Dalits. The well-known Rev. Dr. James **Massey**, a recognized scholar on the problems of the Dalits, has studied this question and his discoveries may be found in a very valuable book titled: "*Roots of Dalit History, Christianity, Theology and Spirituality*". In this book, the author succinctly traces the history of the problems of the Dalits from pre-historic times that resulted in their loss of identity to the present day struggle for their rights. The same author is the editor of another important book, which should be read and studied by all those who are interested in the problems of the Dalits. The title of the book is: "*Indigenous People: Dalits – Dalit issues in today's theological debate.*"

As far the historical roots of the Dalits are concerned, the concluding remarks of Dr. James Massey's findings are quoted below:

"Three main points become clear on the historical roots of the Dalits of India:

**First**, the Dalits are the descendants of the earlier settlers of India.



**Second**, the history of the Dalits present problems began around 1500 BC and for more than 3500 years they have suffered and continue to suffer multiple oppressions, which have always been supported by religion, directly or indirectly.

**Third**, and (which is most important) because of the long history of oppression the Dalits have even lost their self-identity of full human being, which they have now accepted as a part of the natural order of things or as a privilege and this is in real sense the inner captivity of their being from which they need liberation or release.” (*Roots of Dalit History*.... P. 53)

Anthropologists who have studied the main features of indigenous people noticed the following characteristics:

Indigenous people have a primitive way of living and are backward in every aspect.

- they live in remote and less accessible places.
- they have nomadic habits and love singing, dancing and drinking.
- they are not dominant groups and have their own culture.

Those who have a little bit of knowledge about the Mochis or the Nomosudras or any other group of out caste-untouchables will surely agree that most of the above mentioned features are found among them. For example, the Mochis may not have nomadic habits but they are not a dominant group, they are backward in every aspect, they live in remote places and they are very fond of singing and dancing and drinking.

In concurrence with Dr. James Massey, the authors of the “*Dalit Voice*,” (the already quoted well-known magazine published by the Dalits of India) also support the idea that the Dalits share their historical roots with the indigenous people of India, the so-called ‘adivasis’ (aborigines).

## 5. The Hindu Scriptures and the Dalits

Hindu Scriptures do not say very much about the Dalits but what is drawn from the holy books is enough to understand that untouchability has been an integral part of Hinduism since its beginning. The following quotes from scriptures support this statement.

**The Rig Veda:** this is the earliest written literary source of the ancient history of India. The hymns of the *Rig Veda* reveal two hostile peoples in the land of the Seven Rivers now called Punjab: the gods worshipping Aryans and the godless and riteless Dasyas or Dasas.

According to Dr. James Massey’s historical findings these Dasas might be the ancestors of the Dalits who were crushed and conquered and made slaves by the invading Aryans. The Rig Veda reports events which may have happened 1500 BC and which may be considered the beginning of Dalit oppression.

**Upanishads** are the famous philosophical Scriptures, which followed the Vedas.

The Upanishadic period may have began around 800 BC and finished towards the end of the sixth century AD In one of these Upanishads there are references about the Dalits. The “*Chandogya Upanishad*” not only refers to the three upper castes but also compares a Chandala (outcaste) with a dog or a swine. In the 10<sup>th</sup> Khanda (chapter) of this Upanishad, verse seven reads as follows:

“Accordingly, those who are of pleasant conduct here- the prospect is, indeed, that they will enter a pleasant womb, either the womb of a Brahman, or the womb of a Ksatriya, or the womb of a Vaisya. But those who are of stinking conduct here, the prospect is, indeed, that they will enter a stinking womb-either the womb of a dog, or the womb of a swine or the womb of an outcaste (chandala).”

This verse testifies not only to the existence of the outcastes but also to the degradation of the group, which has become known as the Dalits.

**Ramayana and Mahabharata** are the two great epics among the Hindu Scriptures. In the first epic we find the story of the Sudra Samvuka who undertook penance in order to attain divinity. According to the Scriptures only the three upper castes are allowed to do ‘*tapasya*’: penance and meditation. When the god Rama comes to know that the ascetic is a Sudra he cuts off Samvuka’s head. In the Mahabharata also there is the story of Ekalavya, an indigenous boy, whose right hand thumb was cut off because he had learned archery and was in no way inferior to Arjuna (the charioteer of the god Krisna) in his skills.

From these stories, it is understood that there was a clear “pecking order” established in regard to castes and that lower caste people should not be allowed to rise above their station in life. This attitude, recorded in ancient texts, became ingrained in the mentality of the Hindus and provided justification for ill treatment towards the people who are known today as the Dalits.

**Srimad Bhagavad Gita** not only affirms faith in the four castes (*chaturvarnyam*), but also asserts that the Lord Krisna created these castes himself. It also advises members of each caste to follow faithfully the duties prescribed for them on the basis of their caste. The only difference one finds in the Bhagavad Gita from other Hindu scriptures is that by taking refuge in Lord Krisna also Sudras, women and outcastes may attain the highest goal.

**The Manusmriti (The laws of Manu)** is the Hindu Scripture, which must have been written around the beginning of the Christian era. This document removed the human dignity of the Dalits. These are Manu’s laws for the Dalits:

“The dwelling of the Chandals (outcaste) should be outside the village.  
They should be deprived of dishes and their property should consist of dogs and asses.  
Their clothes should be the garments of the dead and their ornaments should be of iron and their food should be in broken dishes and they must constantly wander about.” (X:51-52)

Because of this horrible book, any development of the Dalits was thwarted and they remained in a state of degradation and humiliation, which was institutionalized by these laws.

Along with the Manusmriti, there are additional Smritis among the Hindu Scriptures such as the Narada Smriti and the Parashara Smriti’ which deal with this same topic.

**Narada Smriti** calls the outcaste – untouchables- Dalits, “*mala*” (*mol* in Bengali) or the refuse of human society.

It delineates the following occupations as ones they are allowed to follow:

“Know that there are two sorts of occupations: pure work and impure work. Impure work is that done by the slaves. Pure work is that done by laborers. Sweeping the gate ways, the privy, the road and the place for rubbish; shampooing the secret parts of the body; gathering and putting away the left over food, ordure and urine and lastly rubbing the masters’ limbs when desired: this should be regarded as impure work. All other work besides this is pure. Thus have the four classes of servants doing pure work been enumerated. All the others who do dirty work are slaves, of whom there are fifteen kinds.”

**Parashara Smriti** prescribes elaborate proceedings if a Chandala (Dalit) pollutes the house:

“If a Chandala enters a house the whole house should be washed with water mixed with cow dung and the earthenware should be thrown away. The householder with all the family members and servants should bath three times a day and take curds with cow urine for three days. The utensils of bronze and bell metal should be cleaned with ashes. Cotton, salt, oil and ghee should be burnt outside the house. After that the householder should feed 21 Brahmans and make a gift of 20 cows and one bull to them. Thus the householder and his family become pure”

Parashara Smriti states that if a Chandala or dog touches a twice born person while taking his food that person should give up the rest of his food. The same Smriti prescribes that a Brahman should keep a Chandala at a distance of 16 cubits.

By reading the above Smritis composed around the 5<sup>th</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> century AD, one can discern how the upper castes had legitimized an inhumane system that kept an entire group at a subhuman level. In the name of a religion, illiterate, uneducated people were brainwashed to believe that they were somehow “impure” and of less worth and value than the upper castes.

Evidence of untouchability being fully enforced in that period is found in the writings of foreign travelers around India such as Fa Hien and Al Beruni .

Fa Hien was a Chinese traveller who passed through India in the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD. This is what he wrote:

“Chandals are segregated. They live away from other people and when they approach a city or market they beat a piece of wood in order to distinguish themselves: then the people know who they are and avoid coming into contact with them.” (Arturo Speziale, “The Ethical and Religious Values in Ancient India, p. 327

Al Beruni was Arabic and is considered the first real historian of India. In his book “*Kitabul Hind*” (Book of India) written in the 10<sup>th</sup> century AD, this famous writer describes the treatment received by the Dalits as follows:

“The people called Hadi, Doma, Chandala and... are not reckoned amongst any caste or guild. They are occupied with dirty work, like the cleaning of the villages and other services. They are considered like as one sole class and distinguished only by their occupations. In fact they are considered like illegitimate children for ac-

according to general opinion they descended from a Shudra father and a Brahmani mother as the children of fornication: therefore they are degraded outcastes.”

## 6. Ambedkar's studies on untouchability

Ambedkar is one of the most famous scholars who studied the caste system and untouchability in depth. As previously mentioned, his discoveries about the question of untouchability can be found in his book *“Who were the Sudras: who were the Untouchables?”*

In this book, Ambedkar tried to discover and explain the main root of untouchability, which according to him must be “beef eating.” Ambedkar believes that originally the ancient Hindus were beefeaters. Beef was eaten during important celebrations and used to be offered to distinguished guests. The Laws of Manu did not prevent Hindus from eating beef. However, this book encouraged Brahmins to give up beef eating because Buddhist monks had adopted a vegetarian diet. The Brahmins tried to follow the same diet in order to gain people's esteem and respect. Later, around the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD, the Gupta dynasty officially declared cow slaughter and beef eating a mortal sin. Most probably, those at the bottom of the hierarchical ladder did not care at all about this sin and went on eating beef.

So, according to Ambedkar during both Vedic and Manu's time, the Dalits were considered impure but not untouchables. Untouchability must have appeared later when cows became sacred. Since the Dalits did not care about its sacredness and continued killing cows and enjoying the meat, a stigma arose around the lowest groups and created the idea of untouchability.

Ambedkar arrived at this conclusion because most of the out caste-untouchables-Dalits scattered around India have a lot of dealings with this animal (they skin it-do leather works-eat its meat) and when they want to raise themselves on a higher stair of the hierarchical ladder the first step they take is to give up every activity connected with cow's hides and leather and beef eating.

## 7. Are the Dalits really Hindus?

If the racial theory of untouchability is valid, one then should consider the Dalits as the descendants of the aborigines of India who were conquered and colonized by the invading Aryans. Aryan colonization was threefold: political, economic, religious.

The conquering Aryans imposed their gods and goddesses and rites and symbols and ceremonies on the indigenous people of India who accepted the religion of their masters but at the same time carried on with their own religious traditions.

The scholars of Hinduism would say that Hinduism has two traditions: the great tradition and the little tradition. The religious practices of the high caste communities are called the great tradition and the religious practices of the Dalits and Bahujans (Sudras) are called the little tradition. Which means that Hinduism followed by the Brahmins and Hinduism followed by Dalits is not the same. Of course, there are similarities between the two traditions such as: belief in gods, celebration of festivals, offerings to the deities.

However, there are more dissimilarities than similarities. Here are some differences between the Dalit tradition and the Hindu Manu Dharmic tradition:

**Style of worship:** Dalit worship is gathering together as a community for corporate festivity. Manu Dharmic Hindu worship is more private and individualistic.

**Deities:** the gods of the great tradition are first class deities such as Brhama-Krisna-Visnu etc. The gods and goddesses of the little tradition are second class deities or lesser ones such as Siva-Sitola-Manosha etc. Stories about the various deities are read from the Scriptures in the great tradition but are narrated in the little tradition. Only vegetarian food is offered to the first class deities. Also non-vegetarian food can be offered to the second class deities.

**Place of worship:** in the Dalit tradition worship is done in an open place whereas in the Hindu worship is always inside a building. A festival in the Dalit tradition is always held during the cool hours, mostly at night. For the great tradition a festival is held during warm daytime. Hindu celebrations require fire very often. It is not so for the Dalits. The above differences show that the two so called traditions originated in different regions having different climatic conditions. The Manu Dharmic Hindu tradition came from the cold climatic regions and the Dalit tradition originated in the hot climatic regions. This is why worship for the first tradition requires fire and a warm and protected environment whereas worship for the second tradition requires cool hours under shady trees and riverbanks.

**Concept of God's residence:** the deities of the great tradition reside in the idol kept in the sancta sanctorum of the temple. The Dalit tradition has symbols instead of icons and idols. The place where the idol is kept is sacred. The place where the symbol is kept is not sacred at all: in front of the symbol people can have fun. Only the priest can have access to the idol according to the great tradition. According to the little tradition the entire community can have access to the symbol.

**Mediation:** the great tradition requires the mediation of the priest. The little tradition does not require any mediation.

**Participation:** in the Dalit religion all the worshippers have equal and active participation. They contribute equally to the expenses. Sacrificial meat is equally distributed among the worshippers and members of the community have an active role in the rituals. In the Manu Dharmic Hindu religion only the Brahmins have an active role in the rituals and only the high caste people are included sometimes in the decision making.

**Orgiastic elements (drugs-sex-alcohol):** are present in the Dalit tradition but are completely absent in the great tradition.

These few observations about the two traditions might be enough to cause one to agree with Ambedkar who claimed the Dalits are not real Hindus. Through his studies on the out caste-untouchables, Ambedkar said again and again that the Dalits are not real Hindus and since Hinduism has always rejected them this great leader of the Dalits encouraged his people to leave Hinduism and choose another religion. He himself did that before his death and was followed by a great number of Dalits.

Mahatma Gandhi , the Hindu Renaissance (especially Dayananda Swaraswati and his Arya Samaj ), and the Scheduled Castes Order in 1950 declared that the Dalits are Hindus and started the reversed or positive discrimination only for the Dalit Hindus. Obviously the main reasons behind this interest towards the Dalits was and is mainly political: the exodus of the Dalits towards other religions had to be stopped somehow. In spite of all these efforts both from social reformers and the Government, the Dalits are still hated and despised by the Hindus. The Dalits won't be able to become real Hindus until and unless:

- they will be given religious power
- they will be given a share in the administration of temples and co-ordination of religious festivals.

Hinduism would have to go through a real metamorphosis to the point it might not be recognizable in its present form.

However, there is not a great deal of hope that the Dalits will be able to gain these rights. Admittedly, progress has been made in the area of advancing the plight of the Dalits. At least, an awareness has been raised about the problems of a people kept in virtual slavery by their compatriots. Because this large group has been kept ignorant and leaderless for centuries, it would seem that outside intervention would be helpful to throw off the psychological chains of impurity and untouchability. Christian churches (both Protestant and Catholic) in India could foster a second Hindu Renaissance and help the Dalits to struggle against the sins of Hinduism. Such a suggestion might bring accusations of cultural imperialism on the part of outsiders. However, the issue of human rights is at stake in this situation and should take precedence over "religious tolerance" of a religion that enslaves its people.

# CHAPTER 13

## THE EXISTENTIAL FEATURES OF THE DALIT PLIGHT

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Mahatma Gandhi possessed a deep and intimate knowledge about the out caste-untouchables-Dalits quite well. He labeled them the people of the 4Ls:

- the last
- the lowest
- the least
- the lost

Once upon a time an untouchable was also:

- un-approachable
- un-speakable
- un-hearable
- un-seeable

Everything used to be polluting in a Dalit: his/her person, his/her sight, his/her speech, his/her shadow

Ambedkar studied the miserable situation of the Dalits in depth and shared his findings through his writings. A few of his quotes are listed below in regard to the Untouchables.

“The Indian village is not a single social unit. It consists of castes. But for our purpose it is enough to say the population in the village is divided into two sections:

- Touchables
- Untouchables
- The Touchables form the major community and the Untouchables a minor community.
- The Touchables live inside the village and the Untouchables live outside the village in separate quarters.
- Economically the Touchables form a strong and powerful community while the Untouchables are a poor and a dependent community.
- Socially the Touchables occupy the position of a ruling race while the Untouchables occupy the positions of a subjugated race of hereditary bondsmen.

What are the terms of associated life on which the Touchables and Untouchables live in an Indian village? In every village the Touchables have a code which the Untouchables are required to follow. This code lays down the acts of omissions and commissions which the Touchables treat as offenses. The following is the list of such offences:

**1** - The Touchables must live in separate quarters away from the habitation of the Hindus. It is an offence for the Untouchables to break or evade the rule of segregation.

**2** - The quarters of the Untouchables must be located towards the South since the South is the most inauspicious of the four directions. A breach of this rule shall be deemed to be an offence.

**3** - The Untouchable must observe the rule of distance pollution or shadow of pollution as the case may be. It is an offence to break the rule.

**4** - It is an offence for a member of the Untouchable community to acquire wealth, such as land or cattle.

**5** - It is an offence for a member of an Untouchable community to build a house with tiled roof.

**6** - It is an offence for a member of an Untouchable community to put on a clean dress, wear shoes, and put on a watch or gold ornaments.

**7** - It is an offence for a member of the Untouchable community to give high sounding names to their children. Their names be such as to indicate contempt.

**8** - It is an offence for a member of the Untouchable community to sit on a chair in the presence of a Hindu.

**9** - It is an offence for a member of the Untouchable community to ride on a horse or a palanquin through the village

**10** - It is an offence for a member of the Untouchable community to take a procession of Untouchables through the village.

**11** - It is an offence for the member of the Untouchable community to speak a culture language.

**12** - It is an offence for a member of the Untouchable community not to salute a Hindu.

**13** - It is an offence for a member of the Untouchable community if he happens to come into the village on a sacred day which the Hindu treat as the day of the breaking of fast to go about speaking on the ground that their breath is held to foul the air and the food of the Hindus.

A contravention of any of these rules is an offense. These offenses are not to be found in the penal Code enacted by the British Government. Nonetheless so far as the Untouchables are concerned they are real. A breach of any of them involves sure punishment for the Untouchables. Another important thing to note is that the punishment for these offences is always collective. The whole community of Untouchables is liable for punishment though the offence may have been committed by an individual.” (Ambedkar: Speeches and Writings: vol. 5-pages 20-21-22-23)



Of course, some conditions and restrictions have changed for the better for the Dalits since Ambedkar's times. Nevertheless, the Dalits still are subjected to a great deal of humiliation and miseries on a daily basis. In this chapter we will consider some of these existential features of Dalit plight.

## 1 - Residential segregation

As stated in Ambedkar's writings, the quarters of the Untouchables must be clearly separated from the quarters of the Touchables. Impure people are not allowed to live with or near pure people. This residential segregation of the Dalits occurs in localities identified by different names in various parts of the country. Some of the locality names are pejorative thus indicating the low status of the people inhabiting these places. These localities are typically at a lower level than the non-Dalit localities; more distant from the village roads; and distant enough to indicate humiliating segregation but near enough to be at the beck and call of landowners of dominant upper or middle castes of the village or region.

In rural villages, as well as in towns, the Dalits are compelled to live in separate quarters. Their places in villages are usually located in the south near marshy areas and unhealthy areas. Nowadays, most of these marshy lands are cultivated. However, when originally parceled out, the unwanted lands were just the natural habitats for snakes, frogs, jackals, and every kind of insects that would attack the houses of the poor Dalits living nearby. Moreover, usually the most dangerous natural calamities, such as floods, storms, cyclones, and hurricanes, would burst in from the south and the Dalit quarters would serve as a buffer zone for the higher castes. The Dalit homes would be the first ones to be hit.

Along with residential segregation, there seems to accompany a dearth of social services reaching the most needy. In many areas, the rural poor are beginning to be serviced with potable water, electricity, and paved roads. Yet, these services are not reaching the poorest of the poor. As the Dalits are living unto themselves by forced tradition, it is easy for government officials to bypass entire pockets of Dalits. Since Dalits have not been empowered to ask for or demand their rights, the village elders accept their plight with a fatalistic resignation that this is the lot of the untouchables who deserve nothing according to their brainwashed minds. Roads to the Dalit localities were (and still are in many places) either nonexistent or in very poor conditions. Social services such as drinking water facilities or electricity often never reach the Dalit localities.

As in rural areas, the Dalits who have migrated to the cities continue to suffer from social segregation and marginalization. The bulk of them continue to reside either in separate quarters in overcrowded conditions or in separate slums on the outskirts of the city. Dalits living in cities frequently find great difficulty in obtaining accommodation, as no other community will agree to stay near them. So when they can not find room in the quarters set apart for them they just live in huts or sheds where very often men, children, chickens and goats are herded together as one family with no light or ventilation or sanitary facilities. These huts are absolutely unsuitable for human habitation.

Whether Dalits settle in villages or towns or large urban cities they are shunted off to the side of society and given the most unwanted land to eke out an existence on. Their slums/settlements continue to retain the caste character, which keeps 'impure-untouchable' people separated from "pure-touchable" people.

## 2 - Monopoly of civic sanitation

Even today, the Dalits of the Indian Subcontinent have been left to 'enjoy' a near monopoly of civic sanitation works usually referred to as 'scavenging'. People say that there are two kinds of scavengers around India: crows and Dalits. All the 'dirty' works are left in the hands of the Dalits both in villages and in towns and cities. In rural Bangladesh, the Mochis are still called to remove dead animals from the fields. Also, they are expected to be busy with leatherwork, which consists of flaying the hides, country tanning of the skins, and manufacture of footwear in the unorganized sector. In hospitals, even post mortem examinations are performed by a group of Dalits called 'Doms' who are ordered how to cut the dead bodies under instructions of doctors. In many towns and cities around India, this civic sanitation work is still done by Dalit women and female children who ought to be in full time formal educational institutions.

We have already quoted a very famous novel written by an Indian novelist sympathetic towards the Dalits. The name of this writer is M. R. Anand and the title of his novel is "*Untouchable*". The main character of the novel is Baka, a scavenger who is shunned and hated because of his work. The writer describes Baka's horrible daily life and suggests that the only solution to put an end to the humiliating activity of Indian scavengers is 'technical.' The premise of the novel is that when 'flush system' latrines are introduced throughout India, then and only then, will Indian scavengers be considered human beings.

Something was started in this regard in India a few years ago. A Patna based organization named 'The Shulabh International' was set up for the liberation of scavengers all over the country by converting dry latrines into low cost hand flushing system latrines. This idea was considered totally revolutionary in the area of sanitation. However, the fact that a city like Delhi at present still has an uncountable number of persons working as direct carriers of night soil implies that somewhere things have gone wrong in the approach of that revolutionary organization.

## 3 - Extreme squalor of the Dalit environment

Concerning the topic of squalor of the Dalits, a few paragraphs from Abbè Du-bois' classical book on Hinduism written more than 150 years ago are quoted:

"In order to obtain a true idea of their abject misery one must live amongst them as I have been obliged to do. About half of my various congregations consisted of Pariah Christians. Whenever I went I was constantly called in to administer the last consolations of religion to people of this class. On reaching the hut to which my duty led me I was often obliged to creep in on my hands and knees so low was the entrance door to the wretched hovel. When once inside I could only partially avoid the sickening smell by holding to my nose a handkerchief soaked in the strongest vinegar. I would find there a mere skeleton perhaps lying on the bare ground

though more often crouching on a rotten piece of matting with a stone or a block of wood as a pillow. The miserable creature would have for clothing a rag tied round his loins and for covering a coarse and tattered blanket that left half the body naked. I would sit myself on the ground by his side and the first words I heard would be: 'Father: I am dying of cold and hunger'. I would spend a quarter of an hour or so by him and at last leave this sad spectacle with my heart torn asunder by the sadness and hopelessness of it all and my body covered in every part with insect and vermin. Yet, after all, this was the least inconvenience that I suffered for I could rid myself of them by changing my clothes and taking a hot bath. The only thing that really afflicted me was having to stand face to face with such a spectacle of utter misery and all its attendant horrors and possessing no means of affording any save the most inadequate remedies." (*Hindu customs, habits and ceremonies*, p. 59)

Certainly conditions have changed for many since the times of this French missionary. However, sadly enough, in quite a few places still today conditions are closer to the situation described above than of our images of a modern society. In remote areas (and some not so remote), it is still possible to crawl into huts and be repelled by the smells and sights of the inhabitants within who are still living in the hellish conditions described by Dubois. The medical technology and health knowledge of our generation has been prevented from reaching those who it could help immensely just because they were born into a certain caste. Being ostracized from the main stream of society, the Dalits cannot possibly learn about health and sanitation and therefore have no idea about how to keep their physical environment neat and clean.

Just teaching the Dalits personal cleanliness and how to improve their dwelling places could be an endless field of work for missionaries, social workers, and all those people of good will who believe that human beings have been created in the divine image. Sadly, very often the divine image is the antithesis of the image of the Dalits!

#### 4-Poor share in the economic sphere

Another feature of Dalit existence is their poor share in India's agricultural landholding and still poorer in its irrigated landholding. This is no accident: it is the deliberate outcome of the working of the caste system through history. There are parts of India where formal laws prohibited ownership of land by the untouchables or cultivation of land on their own account. Therefore it is quite rare to find landholders among the Dalits. Most of them are only sharecroppers and agricultural laborers affected by chronic economic dependency.

Ambedkar states the following in regard to Dalit landholding:

"In an agricultural country (like India) agriculture can be the main source of living. But this source of earning is generally not open to the Untouchables. This is for a variety of reasons.

In the first place purchase of land is beyond their means.

Secondly even if an Untouchable has the money to purchase land he has no opportunity to do so. In most parts the Hindus would resent an Untouchable coming forward to purchase land and thereby trying to become equal of the Touchable class of Hindus. The result is that in most parts the Untouchables are landless laborers. As laborers they cannot demand reasonable wages. They have to work for the Hindu

farmer for such wages as their masters choose to give. On this issue the Hindu farmers can combine to keep the wages to the lowest level possible for it is to their interest to do so. On the other hand the Untouchables have no holding power. They must earn or starve. Nor have they any bargaining power. They must submit to the rate fixed or suffer violence. When the agricultural season is over the Untouchables have no employment and no means of earning a living. In such seasons they subsist by cutting grass and firewood from the jungles and sell it in a nearby town. The Hindus who are the main body of buyers will always conspire to beat down the wages. Having no power to hold out the Untouchables have to sell their stuff for whatever is offered to them. Often times they have to walk 10 miles each way from the village to the town and back to sell their stuff. All these sources of earning are obviously precarious and fleeting. There is no security.” (*Writings and speeches*, Vol. V, pp. 23-24)

In this area, economic conditions have not changed very much since Ambedkar’s times! For the majority of the Dalits, their economy remains a ‘from hand to mouth’ economy. This means that economically, the Dalits are not able to rise above their impoverished station

Currently, the main characteristics of the untouchables’ economy seem to be the following:

- absolute and abject poverty with all what which goes with it: malnutrition-infant mortality-illiteracy-alcoholism-prostitution
- dependency on high caste for survival. The Untouchables’ dependent status was and still is reflected in many obsequious practices and attitudes. One symbolic gesture reflecting this idea of servant or slavehood is that when an untouchable greets a high caste person, he does so by touching the high caste’s feet with both hands, which the untouchable then bring to his own forehead as though his own head was no better than his masters’ feet.
- indebtedness: which is the result of poverty and dependence....

An Untouchable’ income is never sufficient to meet not even his most basic needs so he is forced to constantly be in debt to others, sometimes even for years

With so many economic pressures pushing down upon the Dalits, it is no wonder, they cannot rise up. Especially, when the only ones who could help them up are the ones reaping the most benefits from keeping the Dalits at the bottom of society.

## 5 - Severe educational lag

Not only are the Dalits disadvantaged economically, but also educationally. The lack of educational opportunities begins even at the entry level for several reasons. One, many Dalits are afraid to go to school for fear of being discriminated against. Secondly, as many social services do not reach the Dalit areas, the distance is too far for the young children to travel to where schools are located. Thirdly, due to caste prejudices, others purposely keep the Dalits away from the schools so as to not have their children “contaminated” from the Dalit children. Fourthly, because the Dalits are so poor, they tend to need their children to stay home for labor purposes thus depriving their own children of an education. The lack of an education keeps the Dalits locked into their abysmal conditions for generations.

In spite of tremendous odds against receiving an education, a few untouchables have managed to receive an education over the past decades. The small percentage of Dalits who have been able to become literate and get some kind of education have to thank either the schools run by Christian missionaries or the positive or reversed discrimination law of the Indian government.

Finally, awareness about the importance of school/literacy/education is gradually increasing among the Dalits but unfortunately female Dalit education is still very much neglected. Along with teaching the Dalits how to improve their physical habitat, spreading universal literacy among them could be another endless working field for those with endless stamina.

## 6 - Last to be hired first to be fired

Since the level of education among the Dalits is either nil or very low, there is no place for them in the service of the national government or state organizations. Statistics about employment of Dalits in the various departments of the government would show very clearly that their presence is quite negligible.

However, as a result of the Dalit movement and the state policy measures in independent India a section of the Dalit population has been able to get an education and gain government employment. A very small class of professionals such as teachers, doctors and bureaucrats has struggled to emerge among the Dalits. These better-placed Dalits, although very few in numbers, are a challenge to the traditional hierarchies of Brahmanism. The higher caste officials often react against these middle-class Dalits by suggesting that they are in that position not because of their abilities but because of the Government Reservation policy. The higher castes feel threatened and often use conniving means to plot against the untouchables so that the “last hired” (of course, the untouchables) might lose their jobs.

## 7 - Violence and atrocities against the Dalits

For many centuries, the Indian caste system with ‘untouchability’ was able to legitimately operate as a perfect instrument to keep the untouchable castes under total subjugation as providers of labor for agriculture and other purposes. Finally, the revolutionary movements of the last century have instilled some kind of awareness among the Dalits. Nowadays, many Dalits refuse to accept their status as ordained by the Indian caste system and rebel against it. Thus it has become necessary for the dominant castes (upper and middle castes) in different parts of India to set up new instruments of control. This is how atrocities against the Dalits, as we know them, made their debut in the sixties. As the resistance of the Dalits has grown, so also has the frequency and brutal ferocity of atrocities increased.

These are the main reasons behind atrocity acts from high caste people against the Dalits:

**wages issues:** Dalit agricultural laborers demand decent wages and landholders refuse to pay them. Sometimes, in addition to the wage issue, what triggers landholders’ anger is their employees’ assertion of and organization for their rights.

**bonded labor:** some of the atrocities against Dalits are connected with bonded labor which was abolished by the law in 1949 but actually that law has proved to be ineffectual.

fective. Bonded labor still exists in India and more than 80% bonded laborers belong to the Dalit group.

**land demand:** connected with the state of absolute or relative landlessness is the Dalits' land hunger. Land demand is another reason for triggering high caste people's anger and atrocities against the Dalits.

**civic facilities:** provision of civic facilities (such as roads, schools, pathways, water pumps, electricity supply etc.) is so disliked by upper caste people that they take 'revenge' against the Dalits in brutal ways.

**self assertion:** a new phenomenon is atrocities arising from no specific cause other than Dalit assertion of self respect and demand of rights as humans beings or as citizens of India or protest against oppression.

Violence and atrocities against Dalits from the upper castes are usually expressed through criminal acts like rape, murder, arson, beating, torturing etc. Cases of violence and atrocities against Dalits are very seldom brought to courts of justice. If and when such cases are brought to courts, justice for the poor Dalits is very seldom obtained because culprits, police, magistrates and judges are usually from the same upper castes as those on trial.

## 8 - Blamed victims and self blamed victims

The philosophy of 'karma' from which the monster of the caste system has received flesh and blood has always considered its victims responsible for their miseries. The famous trick of the oppressors blaming the victims for their selfishness, pride, and power has been working for ages in the Indian Subcontinent. Unfortunately, it is still working very well! But what is worse is that the Dalits themselves have been convinced that they are the main culprits: they are responsible for their misfortunes in this life because of their sins in a previous life. So, the Dalits are not only blamed victims but also self-blamed victims. These philosophical lies have hurt the Dalits so much that it is so difficult to cure their fatalistic attitude towards life.

## 9 - Internal division in castes and subcastes

One of the worst effects of the caste system is the ingrained hierarchical thinking and mentality, which has contaminated or brainwashed the Dalits. So, even though they are outside the caste system, the hierarchical pattern affects every aspect of their daily living. The hierarchical stratification and all its implications and restrictions such as impurity, hereditary occupation, prohibition of intermarriage, etc. greets each Dalit at birth and stays with him or her through burial.

The first and greatest problem is lack of unity. As the caste system divides society into a myriad of groups having no relationship with each other so the Dalits are divided amongst themselves into many groups (very often quarreling and fighting among each other). "Unity is strength" or "There is strength in numbers" remain puzzling sayings to the Dalits. They do not realize the most effective weapon the Dalits have to fight against violence and oppression from high caste Hindus would be to present a united front. There never has been any idea of cooperation for a common good.

Moreover, since the Dalits are always abused and oppressed by high caste Hindus they internalize this kind of behavior as the ideal one to be followed. Therefore, very often Dalits' behavior is as violent and oppressive as high caste people's behavior if not more. Among Dalits, this vicious cycle is often visible: high caste people abuse Dalit men. Dalit men abuse their wives. Dalit women abuse each other and very often are harsh towards their children. Dalit children are violent against animals. Among high caste people animals are treated very gently whereas among Dalits animals are treated very badly: the side effects of the caste system have gone so far as to abuse the animal kingdom as no humans are lower than the Dalit children.

## 10 - Psychological problems

Another extremely important existential feature of the Dalit plight is their lives have been affected by so many psychological problems. Dalits are broken people. Their liberation will have to deal not only with social and economic aspects but also with all the psychological problems that have crippled them and held them in bondage for centuries.

## 11 - Dalit Women: the most downtrodden of the downtrodden

Dalit women are the Dalit of the Dalit. As women, they are under the typical male domination experienced in so many cultures in both. The life of Dalit women in rural areas is full of hardships and misfortunes. They have to face the problem of hunger almost daily. Due to extreme poverty they have to travel to collect fuel for cooking and while doing that listen to the curses and abuses of higher class Hindus. They have to tolerate the injustices and torture of the higher caste masters when they go out to work in their fields. They have to work in the household from morning to night. They have to bear the beatings as well as the mental torture of their husbands as they are their gods according to the orthodox teachings. The Dalit males are refuters of Manuism but are followers of Manu as far as the women are concerned.

Literacy rate among women is very low as they are the slaves to running the households, helping with the fieldwork, and being at the beck and call of their husbands. That leaves little time for education. As young girls, they are valued less, so nobody wants to sacrifice to send a girl to school as she is seen only as a burden.

Due to lack of education in both the males and females, little or nothing is known in their communities about prenatal care, safe childbirthing practices, and infant care. Studies have shown that rural poor women actually eat less during pregnancies so that they might have smaller babies. Thus, the entire next generation is deprived of important brain cells (that is, if the children live through an ignorant mid-wife's delivery and malnourished childhood).

In cases of caste conflicts Dalit women are the first victims. The first thing upper caste people do, very often with the assistance of police, is rape, even gang rape Dalit women.

In many Hindu temples the horrible system of 'devadashi' still exists. Devadashi are girls who are supposed to live in temples and serve the gods. It is commonly under-

stood that far from serving the gods these poor girls have to entertain the priests and the visitors of the temples and serve them. Most of these 'devadasis' are Dalit women sold into sexual slavery. India can't seem to shake off one of its cruelest traditions. Village priests in India have supervised dedications of devadasi girls to the gods for thousands of years. The British tried to outlaw the tradition and the Indian Government has banned it, too. But according to human rights activists as many as 15000 girls in rural areas are still dedicated to the gods each year.

The upper castes wouldn't drink from the same glass as a devadasi but they make use of her body. Untouchable people become touchable only in this way. Somehow, the stigma of touching an untouchable disappears in bed. Perhaps, the sheets absorb the impurities!

The plight of the Dalit women looks dim. There are few avenues of escape except through two extremes: sexual slavery or becoming church workers. Since education is denied to most untouchable women, they cannot even conceive of the idea of uniting. Even, if they are allowed to vote, they are usually told who to vote for so the election box does not hold much hope for them either at this point.

## 12 - Conclusion:

For those coming from democratic, egalitarian societies, it is almost impossible to comprehend the existence of a caste system and its centuries of molding people's minds and behavior. No matter how one tries, one could never fully imagine the feeling of being an untouchable and the psychological baggage that one must carry. It is easy to be an outsider looking in and grouse, "Why don't they do something about their situation?" It is hoped that this chapter has clarified some of the reasons why the untouchables remain as the the last, the lowest, the least, the lost on the Indian subcontinent to this day.



# CHAPTER 14

## B. R. AMBEDKAR: THE “MOSES” OF THE DALITS

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This entire chapter deals with the greatest figure ever born to the untouchable community: the only real leader they produced. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to devote a full chapter to such a great man, as this charismatic figure is still largely unheard of outside of India where he has millions of followers. This leader stands out in the history of modern India yet few in the west know of him. Of course, western people know Mahatma Gandhi very well and are his admirers. Gandhi is a legend worldwide yet many have never heard of B.R. Ambedkar, the subject of this chapter. So, the following pages will attempt to raise people’s awareness about who Ambedkar was, what he stood for, and what he accomplished.

Why has Gandhi become a household name yet Ambedkar remains unknown? The main reasons are probably the following:

- Mahatma Gandhi never attacked the caste system but Ambedkar did and he did so with all his strength! Ambedkar became a hero to the lowcastes and outcastes who had no voice to proclaim the fame of Ambedkar, their only hero.

- Mahatma Gandhi was a social reformer and Ambedkar was a rebel and a revolutionary. Usually rebels and revolutionary people are never liked by the status quo. Ambedkar was the great enemy of the high caste Hindus who were the status quo of India. The higher castes only made Gandhi known to the world who after all defended their interests.

- Later, Gandhi became the champion of the struggle against British colonialism whereas Ambedkar would have preferred a British Raj rather than a Hindu Raj. This was another reason of enmity between the high caste Hindus and Ambedkar who always kept him in the shadows.

Also, for a long time among Christian people, Gandhi received the lion’s share of attention. For years, Indian theological magazines and reviews raved only about Gandhi. Around 10-15 years ago, Christian sociologists and theologians started discovering the great personality of B.R. Ambedkar and since then very often his thoughts and ideas have appeared in important papers and magazines.

It is felt that social activists working in the Indian Subcontinent no longer can ignore this great man. Those who work among the Dalits should recognize B.R. Ambedkar as their ‘guru’ and study his writings on the caste system and untouchability. It goes without saying that also Christian missionaries should know this man whose life, work, thoughts, ideas and plans might inspire and enlighten them. Missionaries working among the Dalits should be more enthusiastic readers of Ambedkar’s writings and speeches than Gandhi’s ‘Experiments with truth!’

## 1 - Ambedkar's life:

Like Gandhi, Ambedkar came from Western India and was a London trained barrister but Ambedkar's caste, social background and intellectual environment were very different from Gandhi's. He was born a Mahar, which is the largest Untouchable caste in the area. Currently, the Mahars are called Maharastra and constitute about 10% of the population.

The establishment of British rule in Maharastra (whose capital is Bombay) provided Mahars with the opportunity for service in the army, employment in cotton mills, ammunition factories, railroads, construction work and as servants in British homes. It was under these favorable conditions that Ambedkar's grandfather had enlisted in the British army.

Ambedkar's father exhibited considerable intellectual aptitude and was appointed headmaster of the army's teachers' college of the place where Ambedkar was born in 1892. In 1900 young Ambedkar was admitted to an English school and he had the first discrimination experience as an Untouchable: he was segregated from the other students in the classroom.

In 1904, his family moved to Bombay and in 1907 Ambedkar was accepted to Bombay University. Ambedkar seems to have been the first or second untouchable Mahar to attend university. According to the customs of that time, he married early in life to a girl younger than him and in due time the couple produced four children.

Convinced of the young man's intellectual capacities, the Maharaja of Baroda gave Ambedkar financial help to study at Bombay University where he obtained his first degree: a Bachelor of Arts. Even with academic success, this period in his life proved to be a distressing experience: since he was an untouchable his colleagues made life difficult for him. For example, files were tossed onto his desk in order to avoid any contact with him and no one was willing to lodge him.

The same Maharaja sent Ambedkar to the United States for higher studies and from 1913 to 1916 he attended New York's Columbia University where he studied economics, sociology, history and anthropology. His stay in America must have influenced his life, ideas, and career. For, he never contemplated any other political system for the new India than parliamentary democracy.

Neither Marxism nor communism ever seemed to Ambedkar a suitable solution for his country. He embraced the ideals of the west. He lived as a Westerner and unlike other Indian leaders of that time, this man from the lowest castes never troubled to dress in Indian fashion. All his life he projected an image of a Westernized man: giving an air of culture and superiority. Already one could see the first signs of his radical opposition to Gandhi, the apostle of tradition.

After his stay in the United States, Ambedkar went to England to study political sciences and law. When he returned to India in 1923, his political career among the Untouchables started. In 1930 he was asked to represent the Depressed castes at the Round Table Conference in London. This event exploded upon the Mahars like fireworks: even

in the remotest villages the entire population of his caste was incredibly proud to see one of their own seated at the same table with ministers and princes.

On this occasion, troubles between Gandhi and Ambedkar started. Clashes with Gandhi reached their peak in 1932. In 1935, Ambedkar announced that he was born as a Hindu but he wouldn't die as a Hindu and he started studying other religions to find one to embrace but he would take twenty years to complete the search. In 1937, he set up the Independent Labour Party to defend the interests of the Untouchables but this political attempt was not very successful. He was called to write the Constitution of new India and he was elected Law Minister in the first cabinet of the newly independent country in 1947. Just a few months before he died, Ambedkar finally found the "new religion" he had been searching for and converted to Buddhism in 1956.

During his lifetime, Ambedkar became a hero, model, and a symbol within India. Following his death he became a myth and still today the Dalits of India look to him as their great leader and prophet. It could easily be said that Ambedkar has become the "Moses" of the Dalits.

## 2 - His ideas:

The main struggle Ambedkar fought against all his life was of caste and untouchability. Unlike Gandhi, Ambedkar was not inspired by religion which was so present in Gandhi's campaigns against untouchability. Even though at the beginning of Ambedkar's war against untouchability, he had followed Gandhian methods of 'satyagraha,' Ambedkar lost faith in them. He developed his own ideas as productive weapons to struggle against untouchability:

**Education.** Education was seen by Ambedkar to be a great weapon or a major means for Untouchable advancement. This belief led Ambedkar to set up hostels for Untouchable students.

While at conferences, Ambedkar exhorted numerous Untouchables to expand their education opportunities at every level. Much of his effort was aimed at producing highly educated men, capable of raising the image of the Untouchable through their ability to function at the highest levels of Indian society.

Ambedkar's well-known advice to the Untouchables was: educate – organize - agitate

In addition, Ambedkar realized the Untouchables would have to change the following three 'Hs': hand, head, heart.

By *hand*, Ambedkar meant changing hereditary occupations. By *head*, he meant getting an education. By *heart*, he meant becoming free from all the psychological problems the Untouchables are affected by.

**Political power:** Ambedkar's political policies were developed in the light of India's democratizing political reforms. Ambedkar understood that politics could be a very powerful weapon to fight against injustices. He struggled all his life to convince the Untouchable minority they could use political power to advance their lowly positions and status.

The educated-in-the-west Ambedkar strongly believed in the power of representative political bodies to correct social and economic injustice. He adapted western politi-

cal concepts to the Indian scene in order to justify the Untouchables' political rights: democracy, equality, fraternity and liberty. It was in the political field that a major clash occurred between Gandhi and Ambedkar (described later).

**Human dignity:** Ambedkar did not want only educational development and political rights for his people but he dreamed of human dignity, which is the result of liberty, equality and brotherhood. In his speeches in Marathi, he conveyed the implication of these concepts in a single word: 'manuski' which was readily understood by even the most illiterate Mahar villager. The literal meaning of the word is 'human-ness' and evokes feelings of self-respect and humane attitudes towards one's fellow men.

Education, political power, and human dignity were the main weapons, which would enable Untouchables to improve their lives. It was in these areas that Ambedkar concentrated his efforts. Through these weapons, Ambedkar hoped the poverty of the Untouchables would be eliminated as well!

Ambedkar was a legalist: he had no liking for violence nor he did care to take part in dangerous protests. He did not encourage his people to do so either. On the contrary, he warned them of the dangers of violence. He always emphasized how he, himself, preferred legal action. He honestly believed that it was through democratically held elections that the Untouchables would be empowered to express their strength.

### 3 - The conflict between Gandhi and Ambedkar

The conflict between Gandhi and Ambedkar is an important chapter in the history of modern India. It was both a personality clash and a confrontation between fundamentally divergent ideas about the defense of the Untouchables.

One wonders whether Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism might not have been a reaction to Gandhi's Hinduism. Ambedkar did not like Gandhi and his methods. His dislike for the Mahatma clearly appears in his book "*What Congress and Gandhi have done to the Untouchables.*" In this book, Ambedkar expressed the virulence of his feelings towards Gandhi and outlined his clear political analysis of the price the Untouchables would pay because of Gandhi's political stubbornness.

Gandhi's biographers are quite uncomfortable with these events and prefer not to say anything: when they do address the topic, they tend to vilify Ambedkar. Often, "both sides of the coin" is not presented in recorded history regarding Gandhi and Ambedkar.

The first clash between Gandhi and Ambedkar happened in London in 1930 during the Round Table Conference. First of all, Gandhi maintained that he personally represented the great masses of the Untouchables. Then he rejected Ambedkar's idea that the Untouchables should be considered as a separate community with few if any ties to the rest of the nation. Along with disagreeing over the separate community issue, Ambedkar began to demand separate electorates; that is to say a system by which Untouchables would elect their representatives separately from the Hindu majority. Gandhi opposed these ideas fiercely.

In 1932 the British Government agreed with Ambedkar's requests and announced that Untouchables would be given two votes: one for their own representatives and one for the general electorate. Gandhi was furious and decided to undertake a 'fast unto death' in order to prevent that resolution from being implemented.

Gandhi knew how to win his battles: through his fasts unto death! Ambedkar felt trapped and was compelled to withdraw his demand for separate electorates. Gandhi tempered his intransigence somewhat by declaring his willingness to accept the idea of reserved seats for the Untouchables. This agreement became known as the 'Poona Pact' (since Gandhi was in prison in Poona at that time) or the 'Gandhi – Ambedkar Pact.'

The British Government had given Ambedkar and his people a golden opportunity to grasp political power but Gandhi spoiled it completely. The system of reserved seats allowed by Gandhi did not provide the Untouchables with the political representation and power they so desperately wanted and needed.

As previously mentioned, Ambedkar's bitterness for these events is expressed in his book "What Congress and Gandhi have done to the Untouchable." The major theme of the book is Ambedkar's strong criticism against Gandhi's philosophy and action regarding the untouchability issue. Ambedkar regarded the Poona Pact as a Hindu tool for controlling the Untouchables.

Ambedkar held the same view about the 'Harijan Sevak Sangh', the organization founded by Gandhi to defend the Untouchables. For Ambedkar the organization, a type of political charity, was only a guise intended to bring the Untouchables into Gandhi's political party: the Congress.

Gandhian campaigns against untouchability are criticized for lack of success and Gandhi's support for the caste system is considered inhumane. Moreover, Gandhi's idea of ennobling the scavenging profession is viewed as an outrage and a cruel joke. Gandhi's philosophy, Ambedkar concluded, was an insult to the Untouchables. Gandhi was seeking the end of domination of a foreign power but he did not question the social system that allowed one caste to dominate another.

#### 4 - Comparison between Gandhi and Ambedkar

A very superficial attempt to compare these two great leaders can be attempted in the following brief statements:

1. Although Gandhi maintained to be a truthful representative of the Untouchables, he actually represented the high castes and their interests. After all, he, himself, was not an Untouchable.  
On the other hand, Ambedkar was an Untouchable and all his life was dedicated to serve his own people.
2. Gandhi was more interested in evicting the British out of India than to free the Untouchables from their chains.  
Ambedkar would have preferred a more egalitarian British Raj to a Hindu Raj because he understood that under a Hindu Raj the Untouchables would

have a miserable life. He felt that at least under a British Raj, there would be some hope for advancement for the Untouchables.

3. Gandhi had some kind of a paternalistic and one way approach to the problem of untouchability: he believed that change of heart from high caste Hindus would be enough to solve the problem. Gandhi was naïve enough to state that the struggle for the welfare of the Untouchables was a penance to be born by the Hindus.

Ambedkar was not so naïve or blinded by the traditions of the Hindu religion. He framed the problem of the Untouchables before the country in its true perspective: social, political, religious and economic. Moreover he understood that conversion of oppressors' hearts from above is not so easy. Therefore, he insisted on change from below: from the Untouchables themselves and he encouraged them to fight for their human rights and dignity.

4. Gandhi's approach to the problem of untouchability was quite utopian and unrealistic: nowhere in this world is a scavenger's profession considered as valuable as a doctor's profession. This was seen by Gandhi to be a desirable ideal.

Ambedkar very well understood, this change in society's eyes would never be seen and accused Gandhi of being outrageous and cruel against the Untouchables.

5. Gandhi's approach to the problem of untouchability was full of contradictions. The world recognizes the inhumaneness of Untouchability, the worst result of the caste system. It is logical then to assume one cannot get rid of untouchability without destroying the caste system. Gandhi fought against the caste system but wanted the 'varnashamadharm' to remain and continue albeit in a corrected and revised way.

Amongst all of the Indian leaders, politicians and social reformers of that time the fiercest enemy of the caste system was Ambedkar.

## 5 - The religious problem

The quarrel between Gandhi and Ambedkar must have pushed the leader of the Untouchables in an alternative spiritual direction. Most probably the idea of rejecting Hinduism came into Ambedkar's mind after the conflict with Gandhi. Before that, Ambedkar had little enthusiasm for religious matters, which were the main reasons for Gandhi's rejection of separate electorates: Gandhi wanted to preserve the unity of the Hindu nation.

After being defeated by Gandhi, Ambedkar started claiming that the Untouchables were not Hindus. In his famous book *'The Untouchables: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchables'* he put forward the new theory that the Untouchables became so because they were Buddhists and as such were held in contempt by the Brahmins. This pseudo-history looks much like a myth and could have been a way to legitimize Ambedkar's attraction to Buddhism.

In 1935, Ambedkar announced he was born as a Hindu but he would not die as a Hindu. His religious quest lasted 20 years and in 1955 he embraced Buddhism. Ambedkar does not seem to have been tempted by Christianity or Islam because he considered these religions to be alien religions with no ties to the ancient tradition of India. Moreover the poison of casteism had affected both religions.

On the contrary, Buddhism was a religion born on the Indian soil and was a reaction against Brahmin supremacy. Furthermore Buddha had many low caste people among his disciples. Buddhism was an egalitarian religious movement that rebelled against all pantheon of Hindu gods.

Ambedkar's conversion ceremony to Buddhism showed this complete severance of bonds with Hinduism. The following are a few vows taken by Ambedkar and his disciples at the conversion ceremony. Ambedkar's anger and resentment against Hinduism appear very clearly.

I shall have no faith in Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh (Siva) nor shall I worship them.

I shall have no faith in Krishna and Rama who are believed to be incarnations of God nor shall I worship them.

I shall have no faith in Gauri, Ganapathi and other gods or goddesses of Hinduism nor shall I worship them.

I do not and shall not believe that the Lord Buddha was the incarnation of Vishnu. I believe this to be sheer madness and grossly false propaganda.

I shall not allow any ceremonies to be performed by the Brahmins.

I renounce Hinduism which is harmful for the advancement and development of humanity because it is based on inequality.

I adopt Buddhism as my religion.

Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism was a religious event of exceptional magnitude because more than three million people among the Untouchables followed him.

## 6 - Ambedkar and the Christians:

Ambedkar was quite sympathetic towards Christianity and in many of his essays he not only showed much appreciation for Christianity but he also offered Christian people his valuable advice and suggestions for their growth and strength. Here are Ambedkar's praises for Christianity:

1. Christianity is a hope for the downtrodden: Jesus' solidarity with the lowly was the main concern of Ambedkar's admiration and reverence for Christianity. He believed that the teachings of Christ and the liberating message of St. Paul proved a perfect antidote to the poison of Hinduism.

2. Christianity is a religion of equality and fraternity with a firm belief that Christianity is a religion that fosters a just and egalitarian society and is a guardian of liberty, equality and fraternity. Ambedkar claimed to be a friend of Christians. While explaining the social order based on these three principles Ambedkar used quotations from the Bible. He also quoted the famous Christian philosopher Jacques Maritain to demonstrate

the sacredness and value of every individual. He showed that since Christianity preaches brotherhood and equality of all, it is attractive to the lower classes and castes and repulsive to the rich and high castes that prefer to maintain the state of inequality.

3. Ambedkar praised Christianity's humanitarian service in India. Like most Indian leaders Ambedkar held Christianity in great esteem for the selfless service it has rendered to the Dalits and Tribals in the fields of education and health. Ambedkar repeatedly contrasted Christians with Hindus to show that service, love for the neighbor and solidarity with the aboriginal and untouchable Dalits are specific Christian contributions to India. According to him, such virtues as love for others and services to humanity are lacking in Hindus because of the caste system.

Below is Ambedkar's critique of Indian Christianity. The measuring role of judgment for Ambedkar the criterion to judge Christianity or any other religion is whether it caters to the real needs of the Dalits.

1. Christian services mostly benefit high caste Hindus: on carefully weighing the work of Christianity in the field of education and health services with the measuring 'Dalit critical principle,' Ambedkar reached these unfortunate, bitter conclusions:

"The services rendered by the Christian Missions in the fields of education and medical relief are beyond the Indian Christians. They go mostly to benefit the high caste Hindus. The Indian Christians are either too poor or too devoid of ambition to undertake the pursuit of higher education. High schools, colleges and hostels maintained by Christian Missions are therefore so much displaced and misapplied." (*Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 5, p. 352)

Moreover, do these costly works fulfill the aim of evangelisation?

"No," says Ambedkar: 'the object of these services is no doubt to provide occasion for contact between Christian missionaries and high caste Hindus. I think it is time the Missionaries realized that the pursuit of the caste Hindus in the hope of converting them to Christianity is a vain pursuit which is sure to end in complete failure.'" (id. Vol. 5, pp. 452-453)

2 .Caste discrimination in Indian Churches: Christianity's mission is not only to render services but also to convert. Ambedkar acknowledges the right of Christians to convert and defends this right against the Hindus especially national leaders like Gandhi. But Ambedkar understands that conversion, in the Biblical sense, is a serious matter that implies a change of heart and mind, a reversal of one's attitudes. In this regard Ambedkar regrets to say that according to him Indian Christians have not been able to get rid of casteism.

He pointed out that Caste Christians look down on Dalit Christians, poor Dalit Christians are segregated in churches, admission is denied to them in schools and convents, and they suffer from many other kinds of discrimination such as segregated pews and cemeteries. This abomination, among other Christian sins, seems to have discouraged him from his inclination to join Christianity.

3. Christianity made easy with caste: Ambedkar gives this judgment on Christian missions in India (both Catholic and Protestant)



‘Thus all Missionaries agreed that Christianity should be made easy in order that it may spread among India. On this point there seems to be no difference of kind among Catholics, Lutherans or Protestants. Missionaries misunderstood their mission and thought that making a person Christian was the same thing as making him a follower of Christ.’ (id. Vol. 5, pp. 469-470)

4. Paganism in Christian converts. Ambedkar complained that the Christian converts have failed to be liberated not only from the oppressive caste system but also from their past pagan practices. He pointed out that Christian converts continued superstitious and magical practices and have not completely given up the worship of Hindu gods. Ambedkar blamed Christian Missionaries for that because they were very eager to convert people to Christianity but were not determined to uproot paganism from them. In this regard, it must be remembered that the Buddhist ‘baptism ceremony’ designed by Ambedkar for the conversion to Buddhism included twenty two oaths to renounce the worship of Hindu gods and Hindu practices. These oaths were to help lead to the avoidance of Hindu practices along with the rejection of the Hindu value system.

Jesuit missionaries such as Robert de Nobili are held responsible for allowing paganism into the Church. Certainly, Ambedkar did not envision the so-called problem of Christian inculturation in India, which was something not yet born at that time. Even so, today he would probably have many objections about it.

5. Lack of revolutionary movements and struggle for social justice among Indian Christians. Among Indian Christians, in general, Ambedkar noticed that the sense of justice and united struggle for social and political rights is sadly wanting. Moreover, he also complained that once the Christian community is converted, the converts slump into a kind of ghetto mentality.

Upon analysis, Ambedkar’s criticism against Christianity in India has many points still valid for today. Both Christian missionaries and Church leaders should not forget Ambedkar’s main advice was Christianity must return to where she belongs, the Dalits!

## 7 - Ambedkar’s theological significance:

Just to add a few more words about the importance of Dr. Ambedkar for Christian Churches in India: we would like to mention a short article, which appeared in *Vidyajyoti* in August 1994. The article was a summary of a Doctoral Thesis by a Jesuit priest presented at the Faculty of Vidyajyoti in March 1994. The thesis delves into relevant areas of Ambedkar’s thoughts, especially in respect to a theology of Religions and Dialogue, a theology of and for minorities, and a theology of Power and Politics.

These are the main points of that thesis:

- Ambedkar’s life project is a theological project: Ambedkar was fully committed to the humanization and liberation of the Dalits, the most oppressed people of his country. He wanted the Dalits to have bread and human dignity. He made the liberty, equality and fraternity of his people the center of his life’s concern. He placed everything else: the nation, religions, etc. after his people. As such, his life’s project became one with God’s own project who wants all his children to have life in all its abundance.

- From Ambedkar, we learn the right perspective for interpreting theology: Ambedkar's life long struggle with the ruling castes and classes of India show that the elite perspective is in conflict with the Dalit perspective. To analyze theology in India today implies an imperative that we consider the Dalit perspective and reject the elite perspective.

- Ambedkar provides a paradigm for assessing the signs of the times: the inclusion of the poor and the oppressed into history. The inclusion of the poor in history is the inclusion of God and his Reign of Righteousness. No theology could be espoused today ignoring these elements of our times: Dalit, Tribals and Women.

- Ambedkar teaches that the preferential option for the poor is a sine qua non condition for administering theology: obligatory solidarity with the poor should be the main principle of conducting theology.

- Through Ambedkar we learn that the poor are the real subjects of theologizing: as subjects of a new creation the poor bring new hope into the world, new courage into history, and new harvests into human community.

- Ambedkar provides a critique for judging Indian Theologies: forgetting the little traditions of the Dalits and Tribals and concentrating only on the sources of the great tradition (the Shrutis and the Smritis-Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas, and Epics) will not lead to an authentic, liberating Indian Christian theology. Judging by these criteria much of the past attempts at theological inculturation in India would stand condemned for leaning heavily on the Brahminical tradition. (P. Arockiadoss: Note: *Vidjyajyoti*: August 1994: pages 508-511)

From these remarks it appears that Ambedkar plays a very important role not only in contemporary history and sociology of India but also for Indian Christian theology.

## 8 - Baba Shaheb Ambedkar

Ambedkar had such an impact on the Untouchables of India that he has been given the affectionate name of "Baba Shaheb." His photo is present everywhere among the Dalits who consider him a demi-god. His writings and speeches are so famous among the Dalits of India that they have been compared to the Hindu Scripture and are called 'Bhimsmriti'.

The Indian Government has declared B.R. Ambedkar one of the great 'Bharat Ratna' or one of the great jewels of India. His followers would like to have another era among the four classic ones: Ambedkar's era. In some parts of India, his followers greet each other using his first name, Jay Bhim. (Long life to Bhim) and commemorate his words and deeds in numerous stories and songs.

Ironically, Gandhi's ideals seem to have died out. Ambedkar's influence persists and is quite strong. His ideas on political rights have been generally accepted by most of Untouchables around India.

In addition to the vital element of self-respect, which Ambedkar engendered among the Untouchables, his vision of progress through education and politics has inspired many Dalit leaders. Hopefully, one can understand through this chapter why B.R. Ambedkar can be considered the real Moses of the Dalits.

No wonder that during the centenary of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's birth, statues of the great Dalit leader were erected all over India and all around the world. Of course, the most important ones are those in the land of his birth and particularly those in the smallest hamlets and villages, at rural crossroads and bus stands. These statues are more than a fitting tribute to a great man. They are dramatic assertions of the Dalit community's demand to be recognized as an active part of the Indian public life. Symbolically, these statues stand out as an example of what an Untouchable can become!

# CHAPTER 15

## DALIT PANTHERS - DALIT LITERATURE – DALIT THEOLOGY

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Among the numerous Dalits of India, those from Maharashtra have been the most rebellious against oppression of the caste system. When the Bhakti movement is mentioned, one must remember the famous quartet of Maharashtra. In the days of the movement, Mahatma Jyotiba Phule was the first to revolt against social injustice and religious inequality.

Again from Maharashtra, Ambedkar appeared on the social and political scene of India. His writings and philosophy were the main inspiration of the Dalit Liberation Movement. The social revolt, which was started in 1920 by Ambedkar, made the Untouchables, especially the young educated ones, aware of their rights as citizens of a free India.

At the end of the 1960s, these educated young Dalits started a revolutionary movement, which did not last for long but became quite famous around the world. The movement was called 'Dalit Panthers' Movement'. The name of the organization was borrowed from the Black Panthers Movement of the USA. The members of the movement called themselves 'Panthers' because they were supposed to fight for their rights like panthers and not be overcome by the strength and might of their oppressors. The Dalit Panthers Movement was conceived mainly to counteract atrocities and various kinds of discrimination from high caste Hindus.

The young educated Dalits who founded and became members of the movement were dissatisfied with the performance of all political parties and the slow parliamentary process. They revolted against the existing social system and formed their own radical wings.

In addition to the fervor to organize and unite, at the end of the sixties a powerful and rebellious and explosive Dalit literature appeared among educated young Dalits. This literature played an important role in the emergence of the Dalit Panther Movement which became the political statement of the spirit of protest and rebellion which was developed and encouraged through that kind of literature.

The Dalit Panthers declared in their Manifesto:

"We have a clear perspective of our allies and enemies: Scheduled castes, Scheduled tribes, workers, landless labor, poor peasants are all our allies. Left parties and all those forces, which fight against caste and class oppression, are our friends. All those who are victims of political and economic suppression are our co-workers. Power, money, prestige are our foes. Landlords, capitalists, moneylenders and their

agents and the Government are our enemies. We stand for total emancipation and political domination. We want to rule the entire country. We aim not at individuals but at the system. A mere change of hearts or liberal education will not end injustice or exploitation. We shall rouse the revolutionary masses and organize them: the flame of revolution will emerge through the struggle of these vast masses. The social system cannot be revolutionized by mere demands for concessions, elections and Satyagraha. (Gandhi's non violence!) Our rebellious idea of social revolution will germinate in the soil, grow in the minds of the people, and ultimately flash into existence like hot burning steel."

The movement lasted only a few years but it attracted many young people (about 25 thousand in 1974 mainly from Maharashtra ) and became famous not only in the country but also became newsworthy enough to be in Newsweek and covered by the BBC.

Next to Ambedkar, it was the Dalit Panther leadership, which awakened the community of the Dalits again. The militancy of their leaders made the Dalits aware of their latent power. The programs of the movement were mainly of the mobilizing type, such as processions, demonstrations, meetings, rallies, distribution of movement literature, sit-ins and hunger strikes.

Some of the issue-oriented programs of Dalit Panthers were as follows:

- counterattack in retaliation of atrocities
- boycott of elections
- propagation of Buddhism and cultural identity
- acquisition of land from rich landlords and housing schemes
- compelling Government authorities to take 'reverse or positive discrimination' policies seriously
- renaming educational institutions with Dr. Ambedkar's name

The ideology of the Dalit Panthers was a mixture of Marxism, Buddhism Ambedkar's ideas. The Dalit Panthers did not pay much attention to the economic aspect of their struggle: to them social prestige was more important than economic development, because human dignity and respect had been denied to them for centuries. The lack of concentration on economic inequities is the main difference between the struggles of the Dalits and the non-Dalit downtrodden.

Around the beginning of the eighties the Dalit Panther Movement gradually fizzled out for the following reasons:

- weak organizational set up
- immature leadership
- internal conflicts and personality clashes
- lack of a clear ideology
- lack of well defined programs: more words than deeds

But in spite of all these weaknesses, the Dalit Panthers gained much success for the following reasons:

- The movement gave the much needed confidence and courage to hundreds and thousands of Dalits who had lived for generations in silence. The Panthers exploded the myth that the Untouchables are mute and passive figures.
- The Panthers acted as a check on the power of political leaders by boldly exposing their mendacity.
- They helped initiate a debate on Ambedkar's thoughts and ideology.
- They forced the decision-makers to recognize the needs of the Dalits and to commit institutional resources to implement corrective measures.
- Perhaps the main contribution of the movement was its contribution to literature. The Panthers created a revolutionary consciousness among the oppressed through literature.

## Dalit literature

Let's start this section with a poem written by the founder of the Dalit Panthers Movement who is considered the greatest Dalit poet still living: Namdeo Dhasal. The famous writer V. S. Naipul reports in his book '*India: a Million Mutinies Now*' a very interesting interview with this gentleman who has also been named 'the new Tukaram' of Maharashtra. (See: Naipul: India: a Million Mutinies Now: pages 95-119)

The title of the poem is: "*Now, Now!*"

"Turning their heads to the sun, they journeyed through centuries now, now we must refuse to be pilgrims of darkness.  
That one, our father, carrying the darkness is now bent....  
now we must lift that burden from his back.  
Our blood was spilled for this glorious city.....  
and what we got was the right to eat stones....  
now, now we must explode that building which kisses the sky !  
After a thousand years we were blessed with a sunflower-giving fakir :  
now, now we must, like sunflowers, turn our faces to the sun.

Darkness... is the social system in which the Dalits are born .... and the sunflower giving fakir is Ambedkar...

Indian literature is predominantly religious. Since Hindu religious Scriptures were written in Sanskrit, the language of the Brahmins, the majority of the people could not read the literature of their own religion. Buddha is reported to have been the first to have said that his teachings should be given to people in their own languages: Pali and Prakrit. Pali is the Indian language in which Buddhist Scriptures have been preserved.

Moreover, only gods, kings and priests are supposed to be the subject matter for literature. Inferior characters such as low caste and women are not supposed to be subject matter for literature. So, the masses were kept ignorant and deprived from even a place in literature.

Understandably, Dalit literature took another direction. Ordinary characters displaced gods, kings and priests. Common people and common language were enthroned in their place. Several writers from the Dalit Panthers Movement started a literary movement known as 'Dalit Sahitya' (literature of the down trodden). The movement was born in Maharashtra first and then it spread out all over India.

The ideology of the Dalit literature is openly militant and often aggressive: the poor, miserable and timid Untouchable becomes a proud Dalit, aware of his rights and strength. Like the Dalit Panthers these writers and poets have no intention of hiding their flames of revolution: rather they proclaim their revolt loudly and clearly.

Dalit literature is a reflection on Dalit life. Dalit writers borrow their subjects and characters from the community to which they belong. The themes of their stories and poems are taken from real life experiences and deal with caste, untouchability, oppression, injustice and atrocities against the Dalits.

Just as for the Dalit Panthers, authors of Dalit literature derive inspiration from Ambedkar's ideology, Buddhism, and Marxism. Various genres for this emotive literature are used: poems, short stories, autobiographies, plays. Dalit literature quickly became quite famous and has been translated into various languages and is now studied in universities. Currently, it is written in a variety of Indian languages, in different geographical locales, and for various social backgrounds but it has the same common denominator: anger, protest against discrimination, exploitation and injustice. Dalit literature is a reflection of the harsh realities of Dalit life.

Dalit writers and poets draw from the pain and degradation of real life experiences. Dalit literature is closely associated with the hope of freedom of a group of people who as untouchables are victims of religious, social, economic and cultural inequalities. To sum up, one can say that Dalit literature is the literature of the Dalits, written by the Dalits and devoured by the Dalits.

Here is another piece of Dalit literature:

“Mother, you used to tell me  
when I was born your labor was very long...  
The reason, mother, the reason for your long labour....  
I, still in your womb, was wondering....  
Do I want to be born....  
Do I want to be born at all in this land?’ .....  
(L.S.Rokade: *“To be born or not to be born”*)

## Dalit theology

Dalit Literature strongly influenced Dalit Theology. Somehow, Dalit theology sprang out of the Dalit literature, which was a catalyst for the Dalit Theology to be born. There were various reasons behind the birth of the Dalit Theology. Here they are:

- The situation of the Dalits had become worse and worse and almost all the attempts of Indian social reformers (such as Mahatma Gandhi and others) to bring about social changes had come to a stand still.
- Indian politicians were completely indifferent and inefficient towards the problems of the Dalits.
- Caste mentality in the Church was as strong as ever and discrimination against Dalit Christians would not decrease.
- In India, there was ingrained in the people an academic and intellectual activity of the elite for the elite with little or no direct contact with realities-experienced theology.

- Christian Indian theology was Western and when it became Indian was unable to detach itself from the Brahmanical culture and ideology. Only in the late eighties, some Indian Christian theologians understood that Indian theology had the moral obligation to reflect on the subaltern sections of Indian society represented by the rural masses, the Dalits and slum dwellers, the backward communities, tribal peoples and women.

Several factors pushed forward a new kind of theological research:

- Re-conversion of Christian Dalits to Islam during the first half of the 1980s particularly in Tamil Nadu as a protest against inequalities and injustices in churches.
- Re-conversion of Christian Dalits to Hinduism, under socio-political influences.
- The rising consciousness and increasing struggles of the Dalits against dehumanization, deprivation and oppression.
- The intensification of atrocities against Dalits and increasing violence against religious minorities.
- The formation of commissions on caste issues by Church councils.
- The formation of the Christian Dalit Liberation Movement as an all India Forum for promoting Dalit struggles against casteism both within and outside the churches.

The caste system and its worst effect, which is untouchability, were seen as an evil system continuously generating poverty, misery, discrimination and injustice. The Dalit Theology aimed at fighting against this evil system.

A few words should be said about the founder of the Dalit Theology: **Arvind P. Nirmal** (1936-1995) who is considered the most brilliant Dalit theologian of the Indian Subcontinent. Arvind P. Nirmal was himself a Dalit and a teacher. He used to teach English to upper caste students who considered him as untouchable in spite of being their teacher.

This humiliating experience became the base of his new theological thinking, which gradually turned into the Dalit theology. According to Arvind P. Nirmal the main features of the Dalit Theology are as follows:

1. Dalit Theology is done by, for, with and about the Dalits. It is based on their experiences, sufferings, aspirations and hopes.
2. Dalit Theology must be a counter-theology when compared with traditional Indian Christian theology, which focused only on the Brahminical elements. As a counter-theology, the Dalit Theology must foster a counter-culture based on the main ideas of the French Revolution: equality-liberty-fraternity.
3. Dalit Theology would like to write the history of the Dalits: something, which has never been done. Who are they? Where do they come from?



What is their culture like? The Dalits have always been objects: time has come for them to become subjects of their own history.

4. Dalit Theology would like to approach the miserable situation of the Dalits in a Pathos way rather than a logic (Logos) way: Logos is something Western and Pathos is something Indian. Pathos has to do with feelings of the heart: Logos deals with rationality of the brain. Dalit Theology follows Pathos more than Logos.

5. Dalit Theology is the voice of the oppressed. It revolves around the oppression-liberation axis. Dalit theology is not a “fuga mundi:” an escapism from the harsh realities of this world but an engagement with life and struggle for humanization of society which is composed of “sheep” and “wolves.”

6. Dalit Theology is orthopraxis and theopraxis. The downtrodden become the historical ‘locus Dei’. The kernel and core of Dalit Theology is not ‘logos’ but ‘praxis,’ that is liberative. This theology puts justice and establishment of God’s kingdom at the center of Kerigma in lieu of doctrinal orthodoxy and church expansion.

7. Dalit Theology is a protest against hypocrisy of society and temptations and sins of the Church. Dalit Theology is a good way for the Church to convert and atone for its sins.

8. Dalit Theology is based on the Dalits’ direct experience of life. The main ingredients of the Dalit Theology are: their lives, their history, their culture, their languages. Dalits’ languages are very important for this theology.

9. Dalit Theology doesn’t discard social experiments of the past: such as Gandhi’s reformation and Baba Shaheb Ambedkar’s transformation movements. The Dalits need self-affirmation (Ambedkar) and high caste people need conversion (Gandhi).

10. Dalit Theology is a theology of human development and self-reconstruction. It deals not only with economics and human rights of the Dalits but it aims at reconstructing their broken personalities.

## Liberation theology and Dalit Theology

As the American Black Panthers were inspirational to the Dalit Panthers of Maharashtra so the famous Liberation Theology of Latin America was inspirational to the Dalit Theology. Nevertheless according to Arvind P. Nirmal there are very clear differences between these two theologies. Here they are:

- The starting point of Latin American Liberation theology is Marxist social analysis, which divides society in two groups: rich and poor. Dalit Theology starts from a society divided in castes, a social background Karl Marx has nothing to say about.

- The main issues of Latin American Liberation Theology are political and economic. The Dalit theology aims at reconstructing a human person wounded and stripped of his/her dignity. According to the Dalit Theology, human values are more important than economic matters. The most serious consequence of the caste system is a mark on people's souls and spirits which is a sense of pride and superiority complex for high castes people and a sense of shame and inferiority complex for Dalits. Dalits are dominated by a sense of unconscious guilt for unforgiven sins (Karma) which they are supposed to have committed during their previous cycles of birth and which is supposed to have caused their destiny to be born as out castes and untouchables. Consequently, unlike the upper castes the Dalits have a wounded psyche. Dalit theology would like to heal these wounds and free the Untouchables from all the psychological problems from which they suffer.

## Biblical foundations of the Dalit Theology

The 'primum datum' of the Dalit Theology is not the Book of Exodus but the Deuteronomic Creed. (Deut 26: 5-12). This passage has tremendous implications for the Dalit Theology because it expresses the historical Dalit consciousness. The Dalits were nomadic and few in number. With a small population, gradually they became a nation. Becoming a nation is the community consciousness of the Dalit Theology. The Dalits were slaves like the Israelites in Egypt but the Lord freed them and took them to the land flowing with milk and honey. The 'promised land' for the Dalit Theology is political freedom and economic development for sure but above all is realization of full humanness – the reconstruction of the 'imago Dei' - the image of God in the wounded souls of the Dalits.

To use another biblical metaphor, the goal of the Dalit Theology is the 'glorious liberty of the children of God'. According to the Dalit Theology, the Exodus experience for the Dalits has been their passage from an oppressive religion like Hinduism to Christianity where a loving Father has been found.

Dalit Christology talks about Jesus Christ as the great Dalit. His 'Dalitness' appears very clearly from the Gospels. Like the Dalits, Jesus faced rejection, mockery, contempt, suffering, and finally death. All this was from the dominant religious tradition and the established religion. He underwent these Dalit experiences as the Prototype of all Dalits. Moreover we see from the Gospels His total identification with the Dalits of His days.

The Nazareth Manifesto reported in the Gospel of Luke clearly shows that the liberation Jesus talks about is meant for the Dalits. Christ's Dalitness is even clearer from the Cross. On the Cross He was the broken, the crushed, the split, the torn, the driven asunder man: the Dalit in the fullest possible meaning of that term. "My God: why have you forsaken me?" The feeling of being forsaken even by God is at the heart of Dalit experiences and Dalit consciousness in India.

Among the four Gospels, the one, which provides the most comprehensive model for the Dalit Theology, is the Gospel according to Matthew. The 'Galileans' and 'the lost sheep' about which Matthew talks very often are a wonderful paradigm for theological reflection on the Dalits.

Dalit Pneumatology is based on the story of the valley of dry bones in Ezekiel: 37. The Dalits of India are like those dry, dead, lifeless bones. The Holy Spirit can revive these dry bones, give them life, unify them and make an army out of them. The Holy Spirit is the life giver for the liberation struggle of the Indian Dalits.

Dalit Ecclesiology stresses the importance of being in solidarity with the victims of the caste system: the Dalits. The Church must feel this responsibility and as a community of brothers and sisters must take conscious steps to change old attitudes towards caste and victims of caste and thus breakdown the barriers and fences that remain as obstacles to mutual love and acceptance. For the church in India, the healing of a paralyzed man reported by Mark 2:1-12 shows beautifully the possible role of being in solidarity with the victims.

Dalit Liturgy replaces the liturgy of the altar by the liturgy of life. It fosters an anti-temple and anti-cultic type of worship based not so much on external offerings but on the practice of truly prophetic values such as truth, justice, love and freedom. Without these values, the liturgy of the altar is anti-Eucharist, anti-ecclesiastical and therefore sinful. It re-understands sacraments as a way of fostering a counter-cultural behavior and is full of social implications.

Religious people will have to be in solidarity with the underprivileged. Priesthood without the victimhood only leads to clericalism. The formation of the church ministers should be centered around the ethos of the Dalits. Servant leaders of communities should adopt a simple life style and become more indigenous in their worldviews. Big institutions should be revised so that they can serve also the poor and not only the rich.

Through the Dalit Theology, the role of theological colleges also should change. These colleges in India have been factories for the production of priests and ministers for the pulpit and the altar with tailor made precision: in outfit and look. The Dalit Theology would like these theological colleges to be more open to the needs of the people and their movements and to produce prophets more than priests and ministers.

Every theology exhibits its own spirituality. Dalit Theology fosters the Biblical model of spirituality, which is both incarnational and prophetic. This is a spirituality, which compels a person to fight, denounce, struggle, and combat in order to bring about a radical change in the setup of human existence and relationships. Dalit Theology rejects both the spirituality of relief and the spirituality of reform and wants a spirituality of transformation. Transformation of social values is the only way for the Dalits to have a fuller life, experience a finer humanity, and a new earth.

Along with inspiration from the Bible, Dalit spirituality also draws motivation from the saints of the Bhakti Movement; Dalit literature; Dr. Baba Shaheb Ambedkar; Mahatma Gandhi; and all those people of good will, whatever race, caste and creed they belong to, who have fought for freedom, justice and human dignity.

# CHAPTER 16

## UNTOUCHABILITY AND THE LAW

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Because, untouchability is such a cruel and humiliating act against human dignity, first the British Rule in India and then the Indian Government issued special laws against this oppressive practice. Unfortunately, these laws rarely were enforced, seldom are enforced and most probably rarely will be enforced in the future. The following reasons explain the unwillingness to enforce these laws:

- The people who are supposed to be the beneficiaries of those laws are illiterate and ignorant about any legal measures aimed at their protection. Also, being at the bottom of society, the untouchables have no political clout and no money to buy any influence in society.
- A great deal of courage is needed to seek help from the law: poor, illiterate and ignorant Dalits prefer to suffer atrocities and indignities rather than challenge high caste people's oppression. Their psyche has been reduced to nothing thus they have no confidence or strength to rebel against the system that keeps them suppressed.
- The states of the countries where untouchability still persists are the so-called 'soft States' as Gunnar Myrdal (the previously quoted Nobel Prize economist) wrote in his famous book 'Asian Drama'. These States are very strong in passing new and progressive laws but are quite weak in enforcing them.
- Very often those who make the laws, those who break them and those who should pass judgment on the offenders belong to the same group of people.

However, even though the laws have not brought about a dramatic improvement in the lives of the untouchables, information about such legislation will be presented in this chapter.

First we will examine the attitude of the British Empire towards caste and untouchability and then we will study the laws issued by the Indian Government in this regard.

### British Empire

As far as the religious and social practices of India were concerned, initially the British maintained the status quo and followed a policy of non-interference, actively upholding and supporting the caste order.

It was only at the beginning of the last century, that citizens of the British Empire took the first steps towards protection of the lower castes and out castes from social disabilities. Christian missionaries and Hindu social reformers probably influenced the British legislators.

During the first decade of 1900 the problem of untouchability moved from the field of missionary philanthropy into the political arena of the Government. In 1917, the Indian National Congress reversed its long-standing policy of excluding 'social reforms' from its program to hesitantly pass anti-disabilities resolution:

"The Congress urges upon the people of India the necessity, justice and righteousness of removing all disabilities imposed by custom upon the Depressed Classes, the disabilities being of a most vexatious and oppressive character subjecting those classes to considerate hardship and inconvenience."

Reform activity on behalf of Untouchables and political activity by the Untouchables, themselves, increased. So, resolutions and orders confirming the rights of Untouchables to equal use of Government facilities, schools and wells were passed in Bombay and Madras as well as in several of the other more progressive Indian provinces. The Bombay Legislative Council resolved that Untouchables be allowed to use all public watering places, wells, schools, dispensaries, etc. A few years later, a special committee was set up to assess how far these resolutions had been taken seriously. Sad but true, committee members concluded that the new anti-disabilities policies issued by the Government were a "complete failure."

In 1931, the annual meeting of the Indian National Congress at Karachi proposed a program of fundamental rights for the future republic of India, which included: no disability to be attached to any citizen by reason of his-her caste in regard to public employment, office of power of honors and in the exercise of any trade or calling. equal rights of all citizens in regard to public roads, wells, schools and other places of public resort.

A conference of caste Hindus, convened in Bombay on the 25<sup>th</sup> of September 1932, was in line and in philosophy with the new laws issued by the British government. This conference occurred after the conflict broke out between Gandhi and Ambedkar about a separate electorate for the Untouchables. The conference adopted the following resolution:

'This conference resolves that henceforth, amongst Hindus, no one shall be regarded as an untouchable by reason of his birth, and that those who have been so regarded hitherto will have the same right as other Hindus in regard to the use of public wells, public schools, public roads and all other public institutions.

This right shall have statutory recognition at the first opportunity and shall be one of the earliest Acts of the Swaraj Parliament, if it shall not have received such recognition before that time.

It is further agreed that it shall be the duty of all Hindu leaders to secure, by every legitimate means, an early removal of all social disabilities now imposed by custom upon the so called untouchable classes, including the bar in respect of admission to temples."

In 1937, the British Government sent the following order to all District Magistrates in the United Provinces of India:

"All people are entitled to a free and unfettered use of all public property, such as public highways, public wells, public parks and public buildings.

While Government will not fail to do its duty in regard to this matter, it is obvious that public and social opinion must exercise the greatest influence in the solution of any difficulties, which may arise in any part of the provinces.

Government appeals most strongly to all sections of the public to ensure full support to the members of the scheduled castes in the peaceful enjoyment of their fundamental rights in this respect.”

In 1938, the Madras legislature passed the first penal act to remove social disabilities making it an offense to discriminate against Untouchables not only in regard to publicly supported facilities such as roads, wells and transportation but also in regard to any other secular institution to which the general public was admitted, including restaurants, hotels, shops, etc.

Between the end of the Second World War and the enactment of the Indian Constitution almost all the Indian Provinces followed the Madras Removal of Civil Disabilities Act. Discrimination against untouchables (called by different names such as Harijans, Scheduled Castes, External Castes, Backward Castes or Depressed Castes) was outlawed. For a long time discussions went on about the question of allowing Untouchables to enter temples and other places of worship. Madras, again, took the lead in enacting a comprehensive temple entry act making it a criminal offense for any person to prevent any Hindu from entering or worshipping at any temple. Gradually other provinces followed the path showed by Madras and gave the Untouchables an enforceable right of entry in temples.

Thus, under the British influence, at least on paper, the idea of discrimination was acknowledged to be intolerable.

## Constitutional abolition under the Indian Government

In 1950, when the Indian Constitution came into force, the exclusion of Untouchables from public facilities and Hindu temples became an offense punishable in accordance with the law. Once a constitution was hammered out, the following article was included: Article 17 of the Indian Constitution says:

“Untouchability is abolished and its practice in any form is forbidden. The enforcement of any disability in arising out of Untouchability shall be an offense punishable in accordance with the law.”

It is further provided in Article 15(2) that:

“No citizen shall, on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them, be subject to any disability, liability, restriction or condition with regard to:

- access to shops, public restaurants, hotels and places of public entertainment or
- the use of wells, public restaurants, hotels and places of public resort maintained wholly or partly out of State funds or dedicated to the use of the general public”.

Thus a broad range of disabilities is directly outlawed and the Indian government was empowered to take corrective action. The Constitution of the Indian Government goes on with making special provisions for the care of those citizens who are socially and educationally backward.

Article 38 under the Directive principles of the State states is clearly that it is the duty of the State to promote people’s welfare by securing a just and equitable social or-

der. The same Constitution, through its Article 46, has placed an obligation on the State for the special care of the weaker sections of people in areas of economic and educational interests and for their protection from social injustice and all forms of exploitation. Moreover Article 340 of the Constitution gives power to the President of India to appoint a Commission to investigate the condition of people of backward classes and also recommends steps, which can improve their conditions. There certainly was no shortage of laws passed to protect the disadvantaged!

While exercising the powers conferred on him in 1950, the President of India promulgated 'The Constitution Schedule Castes Order' through which a list of the out caste peoples was made. The main criterion for a person to be enlisted in the Schedule Caste Order was also fixed which was religious affiliation to Hinduism. The third paragraph of the Order says: *"No person who professes a religion different from Hindu shall be deemed to be a member of a Schedule Caste."*

This paragraph was changed in 1956 by the Indian Parliament to 'Hindu or Sikh' and again in 1990 it was changed by the Parliament to "Hindu, Sikh or Buddhist". This Order has been a very controversial one in India because there are also Schedule Castes people among Christians and Muslims. People from these two religious affiliations so far have not been allowed to enjoy the benefits of the Positive or Reverse or Compensatory Discrimination.

Not only was legislation written but a position was created for an officer to investigate problems regarding the Dalits. The Constitution of India also empowers the Government in Article 338 to appoint a Special Officer for the Scheduled Castes and Schedule Tribes. Under this article the President of India appointed L.M. Srikant as the first Commissioner in November 1950 with the responsibility of investigating all the matters relating the state of the Dalits.

The report of the First Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Tribes opens with these words which are worth noting:

"Caste in Hindu society is still the most powerful factor in determining a man's dignity, calling or profession. Such a rigid system is not found anywhere else outside India. All such professions involve handling of the so called dirty jobs like tanning and skinning of hides, manufacture of leather goods, sweeping of streets, scavenging etc....are allotted to some castes also known as Harijans. By the force of the habit the Harijan (Dalit) has lost his self-respect to such an extent that he regards his work to which his caste is condemned not as a curse from which he should extricate himself but as a privilege to preserve. He has not much courage to seek another job in field or factory. He has thus become lazy in mind and body and callous to his own condition and he will not educate his children." (Srikant L.M.: Report of the Commissioner for SC and ST...page 1)

These words reveal the inner nature of the 'dalitness' of the Dalits, which they have reached through the ongoing oppression of the caste and the social system which Indian society continues to maintain.

Srikant, the first Commissioner undertook an extensive tour to collect first hand information about the Dalits. Srikant wrote that very few crimes committed against the Dalits had come to light because the Harijans (Dalits) have no courage to come forward and fight against their oppressors since they are generally economically dependent on them in one way or the other.

In 1985-86, 35 years after the first Commissioner's report, another Report of the Commissioner for Schedule Castes and Tribes just repeated L.M. Srikant's statements: oppression and atrocities against the Dalits were going on unnoticed and unreported. Since no efforts had and have been made to change the religious cum social cum cultural features of Indian society Dalits' problems still persist.

In 1955, the Indian Parliament passed a very important law which remained the culmination of anti-disabilities legislation until the end of the 70s. This law was '*The Untouchability Offenses Act*' (UOA). The UOA outlawed the enforcement of disabilities "on the ground of untouchability" in regard to:

- entrance and worship at temples
- access to shops and restaurants
- the practice of occupations and trades
- public conveyances, hospitals and educational institutions
- construction and occupation and residential premises
- holding of religious ceremonies and processions
- use of jewelry and finery

The imposition of disabilities was made a crime punishable by fine of up to 500 Rupees, imprisonment for up to six months, cancellation or suspension of licenses and of public grants. This was a very mild and ineffective law because those in power deliberately avoided having harsh consequences, which could have harmed high caste Hindus. The same law became even milder when it was amended in 1976 and renamed "*Protection of Civil Rights Act*" with minimum punishment of not less than one month's imprisonment and a fine of not less than one hundred rupees.

Dr. Baba Shaheb Ambedkar was not very optimistic about the results of this Act. While intervening in the debate on the Untouchability Offense Act Ambedkar said it is easy to frame laws but difficult to implement them, especially in a country like India where there is a conflict between the 'divine laws' and man made laws. Law alone can not abolish untouchability or any other social evil.

If the persons who are entrusted with the duty of enforcing the law accept it and have the will to enforce it, laws can help. Unfortunately the untouchability laws failed to educate or deter the offenders for the following reasons:

- Police do not register the cases under this law
- Investigation is delayed and police officers do not take interest in these cases. Moreover they are influenced and dominated by upper castes
- Many cases are discharged for want of evidence
- Most of the cases registered under this law do not end in conviction
- Moreover the aggrieved party very rarely files appeal against acquittals of cases mainly because of the heavy expenses involved and the time and energy required in pursuing the case in courts.

Mahatma Gandhi appealed to the upper caste Hindus to change their attitude towards untouchables in their own interest and at the same time he promoted Hinduisation of the Untouchables to discourage their conversion to Islam and Christianity.

The Indian Government has passed laws against untouchability but has done very little to educate people against the practice of Untouchability though it never gets tired of telling foreigners that untouchability has been abolished from India through the



teachings of Mahatma and the efforts of the Government. But the fact is that untouchability is still there. What has been abolished is the name and not the substance. There is a vested interest in perpetuating the practice.

Dr. Ambedkar had expressed these views in regard to untouchability some forty years ago: *“Those who believe that untouchability will soon vanish do not seem to have paid attention to the economic advantages which it gives to Hindus.”* (*What Congress and Gandhi have done to the Untouchables*: p. 19)

In 1979 another very important document was issued by the religious leaders of Hinduism who met in Katmandu under the presidency of the late King of Nepal Birendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev. The document, which has already been mentioned in this research, is more concerned with religious and cultural than legal and political matters but it is very interesting because for the first time in its history official Hinduism acknowledged its misdeeds. Among the various resolutions passed by this important World Hindu Conference resolution No. 31 and No. 32 are noteworthy.

Resolution 31 says:

“Much damage has been done to Hinduism due to caste system and untouchability. So we resolve that Hinduism be a casteless society-religion and that untouchability amongst its brethren be abolished. As all Hindus are equal and all parts of God it is resolved that we eradicate these two evils of Hinduism.”

Resolution 32 says:

“Let the following be the slogan for the unity of all Hindus for peace: One religion and one caste: one society and one culture for all Hindus.”

We think that a meaningful inter-religious dialogue between Christians and Hindus should not forget these revolutionary steps taken by the World Hindu Conference.

Under article 340 of the Indian Constitution the President appointed a Backward Classes Commission in 1953 with Kakashaheb Kalelkar as its chairperson. This Commission submitted its report in 1955 but its observations and recommendations were virtually ignored by the Indian Government.

In 1978, the President of India appointed a second Backward Classes Commission under the chairmanship of B. P. Mandal (known as the Mandal Commission). B. P. Mandal studied the Kaka Kalelkar Commission Report, toured all over India, and analyzed all the facts presented to him. Then he arrived at his own conclusions and expressed his views and made recommendations. These recommendations became what later on was called ‘Reverse or Positive or Protective Discrimination’.

Positive discrimination designates the set of measures adopted by the Indian Government in favor of certain disadvantaged social categories, the purpose of which is to rectify the inequalities and discriminations that afflict them.

Before making recommendations the Mandal Commission made a thorough analysis of the root causes of the backwardness of the Scheduled castes. According to the Commission the caste system is the root cause of all kinds of backwardness. Its effects have gone right into the being of people as stated:

“The real triumph of the caste system lies not in upholding the supremacy of the Brahmin but in conditioning the consciousness of the lower castes in accepting

their inferior status in the ritual hierarchy as part of the natural order of things.”  
(*Report of the Backward Commission*: 1st part, p. 14)

In order to redress the grievances of the Scheduled Castes the Mandal Commission stressed the following recommendations:

1. Reservation of jobs for the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) in proportion to their population. The Mandal Commission proposed a reservation of 27% to be applied to all Government services as well technical and professional institutions.
2. Special educational facilities for the OBC (Other Backward Castes). Going beyond mere reservations in jobs the Mandal Commission recommended special educational facilities designed at upgrading the cultural environment of the OBC students. The Commission recommended that special emphasis be placed on vocational training. Separate coaching facilities were to be provided in technical and professional institutions to OBC students to enable them to catch up with students from high castes.
3. Special programs: thinking in a rather comprehensive way, the Mandal Commission also recommended special programs for upgrading the skills of village artisans. The program was to include subsidized loans to be granted to the OBCs by financial institutions so that they could set up small-scale industries.
4. Another recommendation along this line was that, in order to promote the participation of OBCs in the industrial and business life of the country a separate network of financial and technical institutions should be created by all State Governments.

The Mandal Commission was aware that all these recommendations even when fully implemented could only hope to solve one part of the problem faced by the OBCs and other oppressed people in India. The report clearly said that under the existing scheme of production relations Backward Castes comprising mainly small land holders, tenants, agricultural laborers, and village artisans are heavily dependent on the rich peasantry for their sustenance. Therefore, the OBCs continue to remain in mental and material bondage to the dominant castes and classes.

Unless these production relations are radically altered through structural changes and progressive land reforms implemented rigorously all over the country the OBCs will never become truly independent. In view of this All States should give the highest priority to radical land reforms.

The report of the Mandal Commission was submitted in 1980 and it remained in cold storage under Indira and Rajive Gandhi's regime. But when it was published there was a lot of anti reservation agitation and aggressive protest from high caste people. Agitation and protest turned into some kind of a caste war in 1990 when the former Prime Minister V. P. Singh announced the partial implementation of the Mandal Commission Report.

High caste gangs vented their anger and fury against low caste and out caste people who were supposed to be the beneficiaries of the MCP recommendations. People became totally irrational over issues such as the issue of 27% reservation of jobs for OBCs and SCs and STs. People reacted senselessly as exemplified by the gruesome stories of self-immolation by high caste students all over the country.

Upper and middle castes were not merely in arms against the proposed reservations for the backward castes in Government jobs. In reality, they were asserting their right to “overlordship” and tyranny in regard to their “slaves.”

The Government policy of protective discrimination in favor of SCs, STs and OBCs has become a burning issue in India today. Assessments and views both ‘for’ and ‘against’ this protective discrimination currently remain unsolved, controversial issues in India.

In conclusion, these few observations on the Mandal Commission Report (MCR) show that in a highly unequal society like the Indian society it is only by giving special protection and privileges to the underprivileged section of society that exploitation from the strong can be tackled and resisted. If the recommendations of the Mandal Commission Report are seriously and honestly implemented the status of the SCs, STs and OBCs who form two thirds of India’s population is sure to improve. In spite of some negative side effects, the system of protective discrimination has helped and is aiding a segment of society that has been exploited for centuries.

The last law passed by the Indian Government to protect the Dalits of India has been the ‘Prevention of Atrocities Act’ issued in 1989. The word ‘atrocities’ is used in India in relation to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes who are subjected to violence and brutalities, especially in the rural areas by the upper castes Hindus and police force.

As for instructions issued by the Government of India the term ‘atrocities’ implies any offense under the Indian Penal Code (IPC) committed against members of the Scheduled Castes by any non-Scheduled Caste person. Similarly all offenses under the IPC committed by the non-scheduled tribes against the members of the scheduled tribes are atrocities. For the purpose of collection of statistics atrocities have been classified under five heads, namely: murder, torturing, rape, arson and other IPC offenses.

It seems as if atrocities are committed whenever the Dalits try to assert their rights as human beings or as citizens of India or to protest against oppression. Unfortunately the two laws issued for the purpose of protecting the Dalits (Protection of Civil Rights Act and Prevention of Atrocities Act) have not proved to be very helpful.

Laws can help check atrocities if those entrusted with the enforcement of the law sincerely implement them. But Government officers dominated by upper caste people lack the will to enforce the law. On the other hand, Dalits continue to be too weak to take advantage of these laws. Moreover in some places around India landlords and upper caste people have raised private armies to suppress the Dalits. The landlords and upper caste people hold power and Dalits remain powerless. Without changing the power structure, no lasting solution can be found to check atrocities or injustice done to the Dalits.

To end this chapter on Untouchability and law, the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) must be mentioned. NCDHR is a movement that was born in India a few years ago to coordinate activities by Dalits against caste discrimination. The development of the NCDHR within India has been paralleled by the growth of an international network of NGOs representing a wide range of countries. The International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN) began its life in London in March 2000. IDSN defined its purpose as to raise consciousness about Dalit people nationally and internationally and to advocate separately and together Dalit human rights in international forums. There is no doubt that concern will continue to rise and that caste and untouchability are rapidly becoming international human rights issues.

# CHAPTER 17

## THE PSYCHOLOGICAL WORLD OF THE DALITS

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In order to have a complete picture of the world of the Dalits, something has to be stated about the psychological problems which affect and harm this group of downtrodden people so much.

The admittance into the external world of the Dalits is not easy but an inquiry into their inner world is even more difficult and complicated. A few psychologists in India have attempted to enter this hidden inner world and study the psychology of the Dalits. In this chapter, we will report some of their findings on this subject which should be very important for all those who want to work towards the liberation of the Dalits. A few practical suggestions will follow the findings of the Behavioural Sciences.

An exposure to the limited knowledge that exists about the psychological world of the Dalits should be a 'must' for those who are interested in their liberation. The Dalits won't be fully free as long as they retain all their inner problems from culturally condoned behaviour. The power of the caste system and untouchability is so pervasive that it can keep a person in strong bonds of self-captivity and slavery from which it seems almost impossible to obtain liberation and freedom.

The inner nature of the Dalits is responsible for many problems of the Dalits, which simply can not be dealt with by merely passing new laws to defend their human dignity and protect them from atrocities or by providing them with economic facilities. The full liberation of the Dalits will happen only fully and completely at the psychological level!

A little bit of knowledge about the psychological world of the Dalits might also be very helpful for Christian missionaries. Very often, Christian missionaries serving the Dalits can't understand their irrational and angry reactions. Working among the Dalits not only is frustrating but is very painful as well. Christian missionaries only receive encouragement to go on with their work among the angry and ungrateful Dalits from the Cross of Christ. However, sometimes even the Cross of Christ is not enough. That is when a little bit of knowledge about the Dalits' inner world might assist Christian missionaries to endure criticism and anger vented against them without being wounded too much.

Those who have tried to enter the inner world of the Dalits in India use a special word to describe it: 'dalitness'. By 'dalitness' these social scientists mean all the serious problems a Dalit has to face to live harmoniously in society.

The ingredients of this 'dalitness' are the following:

- a strong inferiority complex
- a low self image

- uncontrollable emotions and impulses which are expressed through anger and aggressiveness
- sense of shame and humiliation
- anxiety and fear
- resignation and fatalistic attitude to life

In this chapter, each of the above “ingredients” will be further explored.

## Inferiority complex

One of the tests psychologists use to discern how patients feel about themselves is to ask the people being studied to draw a ‘self portrait’. Almost 90% of the Dalits asked to draw a picture of themselves drew pictures, which did not have necks. They drew their neck less heads with enlarged eyes, ears, and mouth over their shoulders. According to the psychologists who conducted these tests the neck is a sign of ego formation, that is self-assertion, self-identity, self-esteem etc. As depicted in the self-portraits, these important features of the human being are lacking among the Dalits.

The Dalits seem to have psychologically removed their necks in order to survive under their masters, the high caste people. However, their intelligence, cleverness, watchfulness and carefulness (symbolised by their enlarged head, eyes and ears) help them to survive. The Dalits have an innate mental sharpness and they can pay attention to details unobserved by other people. A constant struggle to survive must have developed this mental sharpness.

The Dalits are like dogs with their heads bent down as none in their society want to even throw them a bone. This domestication of the Dalits is the result of generations and generations of exploitation and oppression.

It was not a surprise for the psychologists to see figures with high necks when the Dalits were asked to draw pictures of their masters, the high caste people. The Dalits recognize the lordship of their masters like a dog recognizes the authority of its owner. This recognition of authority and lordship is the main reason of the servile and submissive attitude of the Dalits, which creates in them a strong inferiority complex.

Certainly, after having been considered inferior human beings for ages and ages they will probably never suffer from a superiority complex. The challenge will be to give the Dalits a sense of self worth and self-confidence without turning them into hateful, spiteful avengers.

Interestingly enough, psychologists have noticed that when Dalits draw pictures of themselves most of the figures carry a double lining of the body. This double lining is a sign of the strong boundary, which the Dalits put up to prevent people from entering their world. Those who have some practical experience among the Dalits know how difficult it is to understand what goes on in their minds, let alone their hearts. A great wall seems to stand between other people and themselves. Very often ‘silence’ is a way the Dalits use to put up this wall to keep the oppressors out!

## Low self image and anger

The main psychological problem of the Dalits seems to be with their self-image. After having been considered polluted and polluting beings for centuries and centuries the Dalits’ self image is that of a rejected people including self-rejection.

Of course, this self-image affects the Dalits' deepest feelings and behavior. According to Indian psychologists, it is this self image that is the core issue for effective help offered to the Dalits to bring about any kind of change.

The Christian missionary or the agent of change not only must understand and accept this self image but he/she must help the Dalits themselves to become aware of their own self understanding and help them to have hope that they can really become new creations, productive people and images of God.

Indian psychologists have discovered the Dalits' low self-image by watching the tendency of Dalits to prefer 'losers' rather than 'winners'. Studies among Dalit Christian students have shown that their most favorite Biblical figures are the suffering ones. One of their most favourite Biblical characters is Job who was naked and dirty, covered with sores sitting in the ash pit. Job is surrounded by his friends who were standing over him, clean and looking very much at ease with the world.

The Dalits do not identify with the 'winner' David slaying Goliath but the 'loser' Job. The Dalits see themselves as under dogs, persecuted and victims.

E. J. **Daly**, a Jesuit missionary priest in his book titled "*On Becoming a Pilgrim People*", has studied what happens to them when they relate with others. A very interesting article by the same author appeared on Vidyajyoti of August 1988. These are a few quotations from that article:

"The Harijan's (Dalit's) inter-relation with non-Harijans (non-Dalits) is typically in a stereotyped role of 'victim'. In Transactional Analysis this term means that there is a pattern of thoughts, feelings and behaviour within the victim to support and foster a 'poor me' position. (The victim's complex) According to the well known TA concept of the Karpman Triangle every 'victim' psychos: once you are in you can't get out unless the 'player' (the victim) becomes authentically aware and freely opts out. The person playing the role of victim at any one moment verbally or not verbally may shift into a persecutor role the next moment. One second he is the suffering servant, Job: the next second he is hurling abusive language or showing violent behaviour towards his rescuer".

Undoubtedly, all the Christian Missionaries who have had the chance of spending some time working among the Dalits have experienced this outburst of anger from the beneficiaries of their services and love. Usually, the poor verbally abused missionaries (who have sometimes been threatened with physical attacks as well) are completely at a loss with this kind of behavior. They have no idea why the Dalits vent their anger and rage against them; they are the ones who have come to befriend the Dalits.

E. J. Daly gives the explanation of this irrational and strange behaviour:

"I found an answer in the phenomenon of 'transference' and 'counter transference'. This mechanism is described in psychological texts this way: the patient sees the present in terms of the past and then, without being aware that he is acting from the past, he/she tries to relive the past with more satisfaction than she/he actually did. Thus, people and situations in the here and now evoke earlier experiences. The patient ascribes to people in the here and now negative or positive attributes of sig-

nificant persons encountered much earlier and he carries out his interaction now on the basis of these transferred feelings and experiences of the past.

Applied to the Harijan, individually and collectively, we easily see the history of oppression. Within them Harijans (Dalits) have stored up anger, fury, shame and many other negative emotions. In the past the Harijans (Dalits) had to suppress such feelings towards his persecutor/oppressor: other wise he would have been ruthlessly crushed by the landowners....

When Harijans (Dalits) became catechumens and baptized Christians they often find the priest in the parish and mission station in practically the same role-outwardly- as the landowner. The priest hires and fires, pays and punishes, rewards and fines his workers... and the Harijan (Dalit) sees the priest and treats him as landowner.

This at the unconscious level. When a crisis, small or large, arises, the Harijan's (Dalit) past history becomes operative by transference. For a relatively small matter the Harijan (Dalit) will experience a big explosion of emotion.

Unconsciously at this moment the Harijan (Dalit) is reacting emotionally not to the priest-authority-figure in front of him but to the Brahmin and Rajput landowner in his individual and collective past.

Notice the point here: in the past the Harijan (Dalit) and his relatives could not dare to strike back at the caste leaders: but now the Harijan does strike back. It's not instinctive but near it for him to know that he can vent his anger verbally and non verbally upon the priest, knowing that he will not strike back in retaliation as the landowners did in the past (and do today, also)'.... (*Helping Harijans change*, Vidyajyoti, August 1978).

Through this transference mechanism the victim has now become persecutor of his rescuer and the rescuer has become the victim.

At this stage the new victim (the rescuer) should be very careful not to fall into the trap of counter-transference: that is the rescuer must not turn into a real persecutor by giving back abuses or violence otherwise he/she would be perpetuating a vicious cycle of abuse. Verbal abuses could even turn into physical ones and the rescuer could become a victim of the uncontrolled fury of the Dalits. Usually if the rescuer refuses to be trapped into the counter-transference mechanism and accepts to be the victim the uncontrollable burning emotions of the Dalits are quickly put out and reconciliation between the real victim and the rescuer takes place.

But that rescuer must be a very compassionate and forgiving person. The rescuer must muster up every ounce of grace within him or her to accept the Dalits trying to unsteadily climb out of their abyss of repression. Unfortunately, 'rescuers' who are the most compassionate and forgiving with Dalits are persecuted most by them.

These mechanisms of the transactional analysis and the triangle of Karpman should be studied deeply by those who would like to work among the Dalits. Through these studies it should come out clearly that the inner self of the Dalits is deeply wounded and altogether with economic human development the Dalits need psychological healing.

Moreover, those who want to be agents of change among the Dalits will have to be ready to suffer a lot! Since the Dalits for the most part have never been treated humanely, they are at a loss as to how to deal with compassion, forgiveness, and grace.



## Shame and humiliation Creating Fear and Anxiety

Another huge psychological problem Dalits have to face is the sense of shame and humiliation for belonging to a low and impure caste. The only solution many Dalits have to solve this problem is to move away from their caste and try, through their individual abilities, for a place in the general system which is the domain of upper castes. Many who have moved out from their social group have to hide their caste identity and if they are Christians their religious identity, too. As a member of the Untouchables, they know that they are not 'wanted' by the greater society. In order to be accepted they will just try their best to conceal their roots and by doing that they will be compelled to tell lie after lie.

This attempt to hide and conceal their real identity creates tension and fear and prevents them from having a healthy relationship with others. At the same time it creates anxiety and fear of the unknown and this prevents them from facing life with courage and strength.

## Fatalistic attitude

It is not easy to foster enthusiasm and a belief in change among the Dalits who have a deep fatalistic attitude towards life. For sure this fatalistic attitude comes from the Indian belief in 'karma' which for the Dalits has been a real social curse. The Dalits believe that through their miseries they are just expiating the sins committed in their previous lives.

It is so difficult to make them understand that somebody else is responsible for their sub-human situation. Therefore they accept their lot passively and with a sense of resignation which is the reason for their lethargy and apathy. This apathy makes them believe that they can not conquer and transform the reality around them.

## Possible ways out

It is extremely difficult for the Dalits to grow into people with dignity, assurance and self respect but it is not impossible.

A variety of factors may help:

- educational achievements
- struggle of their group (caste) for liberation
- inspiration from egalitarian religion (like Christianity-Islam-Buddhism)
- personal determination and efforts
- acceptance from people of other castes (this may be the most important factor)

Unfortunately, very few people are blessed with such a convergence of favourable factors which might initiate the steps to be taken to help the Dalits grow out of their stigmatized identity.

Most probably the most important step is to fight against those evils which has poisoned the inner world of the Dalits and have created in them that low self image we have talked about. It is not possible to understand an individual apart from his social reality. Specifically the low self image of the underprivileged Dalits is the result of a

value system which is imposed on them by the higher castes. The reality prevailing in a society built on the caste system and untouchability is one of privilege where those at the top have everything and those at the bottom have nothing. This social-economic order strengthened by religion and culture and time is internalised by everybody in society.

To those in a position of privilege this internalization does a lot of good not only psychologically but in other material and social terms as well. The opposite is true for the underprivileged that not only are deprived socially and economically but also psychologically and this deprivation is the most severe in terms of personal pain, psychological harm and social consequences.

No effective fight against this low self-image of the Dalits can be waged unless a war against the value system created by the caste system and untouchability is also effectively fought. In order to heal individuals agents of change working among the Dalits must strive to transform the social reality as well by establishing a society based on solidarity and brotherhood. In other words, an egalitarian casteless society.

Another way to assist the Dalits to change their low self-image is to give them as much 'empowerment' as possible. 'Dalit Power' was a familiar word among the Dalit Panthers and Dalit literature very often talks about it. This 'empowerment' the Dalits need must start with consciousness of all the injustices committed against them by society.

Then the Dalits must learn to protest against all the evils, which oppress them and fight against them according to Ambedkar's strategy: 'educate-organize-agitate'. Organization and agitation may help in the conscientization and growth of the Dalits.

The sense of inferiority and shame will start to fade away and self-respect will be acquired.

Education should be considered the best tool for empowerment. The saying 'knowledge is power' is valid for the Dalits as well as the rest of the world. Through education they will be able to become literate and eventually competitive with others in the job market. An education and marketable skills will enable them to hold their heads high rather than in shame.

The Dalits should be brought to realize that not only they can have power but they can be power as well... Power is within them! However, this sort of mobilization will require educated leaders from within their own groups.

Another important step towards a personal growth of the Dalits is affirmation of selfhood. Which means a replacement of the sense of shame and humiliation with a sense of pride for being a Dalit. The Dalit people are no longer ashamed of being Dalit. They are beginning to be proud of their history and culture which has been able to survive in spite of the oppression of the caste system.

In this way they should be able to get rid of their 'inferiority complex' and 'slave mentality'. And what is more important they should be able to free themselves from that feeling of fear and anxiety which harms them so much. The liberation of this inner captivity is in a real sense the regaining of fuller identity or humanity of the Dalits.

Another radical way of producing a personal psychological change might be to change religions. Christianity could be very helpful in this regard. In the context of the Christian ideal of equality and fellowship the Dalits could gain psychological freedom for the sense of being polluted persons and from their low self image.

Christian Baptism should have a tremendous effect on the Dalits. '*You are my son, the beloved: my favour rests on you*' (Mk 1,11). But the truth of these words should be shown by interpersonal relationships within an authentic Christian community. Then the self-image of a true Son of God could take away the distorted identity of a polluting or self-rejecting person that untouchability has fostered for centuries. Unless and until a Christian community witnesses to these baptismal words embracing Christianity won't help the Dalits very much to get rid of their low self image. Unfortunately, Indian Christianity has not done very much in this regard.

Dalit Theology may help Christianity in India to be a real path of liberation for the Dalits. If partnerships can be formed between leaders of the various Christians churches and the Dalits to help the Dalits advance psychologically, educationally, economically, and spiritually, the Dalits may be able to emerge from their bondage. Undoubtedly, this journey will take a super-human amount of understanding and patience to achieve success. Not many will be up to the challenge!

# CHAPTER 18

## MISSIONARY ACTIVITY 'AD GENTES' DALIT

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The last chapter of this study-research on caste and untouchability offers a few practical suggestions and bits of advice to those who have been sent by the Lord 'ad gentes' Dalit. This chapter may interest Christian missionaries (both Catholic and Protestant). It may also be of value to social workers (such as NGO people) who are aware of the problems of the Untouchables and are working if not to completely solve the problems, at least to decrease the ever-present dilemmas of the Dalits.

Before getting into the real subject of this chapter it should be remembered that altogether with a 'mission' among the Untouchables there should be some kind of a 'mission' also among the 'Touchables'.

In this regard a real authority on the Dalits of India should be quoted. Stephen **Fucks**, the Dutch missionary, who did a lot of pioneer work on studies and research about the Untouchables was mentioned previously in this paper. He wrote the following in one of his last books:

'The Harijan (Dalit) problem is not so much a problem of the Harijans but rather a problem of the caste Hindus. For they have created the Harijans. The Harijans themselves are very eager to be assimilated by Hindu society but they are consistently rejected by the caste Hindus. Those who work for the abolition of untouchability must consequently mainly concentrate on a change of heart of the high castes. The caste Hindus must be enlightened and must be convinced that their attitude towards the Untouchables is wrong and harmful not only to the Dalits but to themselves as well and to the whole Indian nation: that untouchability is unjust, unreasonable and unwarranted.

Social and economic uplift of the Harijans is necessary and beneficial, no doubt, but it does not touch the root of the evil. Even revolts of the Harijans will have no lasting effects for they can always be suppressed. The traditional caste people of India fear that the whole age-old order of Indian society will be upset and destroyed if untouchability goes and the low castes are treated as equals. They are still convinced that powerful and valid religious, social and economic reasons exist for the continuance of the caste system and untouchability. It must be proved to them convincingly that these reasons are no longer valid and that a change of the old social structure of Indian society is inevitable and even beneficial to them, too. It appears that the problem of untouchability has not been tackled sufficiently from this side.... The problem must be tackled from the side of those who created it and who have a strong interest in its survival and less from the side of the victims of untouchability....

The fact should not be ignored that the low castes and even the Harijans practise untouchability. If possible they are even worse perpetrators than the higher castes...No human beings wants to be at the bottom of human society.... and the lowest man, in order to retain a shred of his self-respect, desires to look down on some other human being and at least pretend that the other man is still a little lower...! And since he clings desperately to this superiority whether real or only pretended he may be even more intolerant towards other castes more than high caste people would be...This attitude can only be changed once the pressure from above ceases and low castes everywhere are treated as equals....  
Untouchability is a disease of the superior castes... they have to be cured of it'. (*At the bottom of Indian Society*, pp. 4-6)

Stephen Fuchs fully agrees with Mahatma Gandhi who was the most prominent caste Hindu to proclaim that untouchability was harmful to Hinduism and who made its removal a personal responsibility of the caste Hindus. Both Gandhi's and Fuchs's ideas should not be ignored by Christian missionaries and social workers. The shared ideas should be the starting point of a serious inter-religious dialogue between Christians and Hindus.

### Mission to the Dalits (Historical perspective)

Three main historical moments may be delineated while studying the history of missionary work among the Dalits:

- the mass movement period (1850-1920)
- pre-independence period (1920 –1948)
- post-independence period (1948....)

**The mass movement period** can be considered the time of the early mission to the Dalits. The Dalits who approached Christianity had the great hope that they would be liberated from their slavery and oppression. But the primary concern of the Christian missions seems to have been the establishment of religious communities of Christians or planting the Church rather than assisting and encouraging a historical process of human liberation of a broken people.

Christian missionaries were more interested in saving souls than working for the integral liberation of the Dalits joining Christianity. Moreover the new Christian Dalits could not compete with the non Dalit Christians who occupied the second rung of leadership after the foreign missionaries and who monopolised all positions of power and authority within the churches and Christian institutions such as schools, colleges and hospitals. Sadly, even within Christianity, the Dalits remained on the bottom rung.

**The pre-independence period** saw the struggle for freedom from the British Empire. The main personalities interested in the problems of the Dalits of that time were Gandhi and Ambedkar. Gandhi and his political party (the Congress) claimed to be representative of all sections of the society but in fact it represented the well-to-do classes and castes and their interests. Ambedkar struggled for freedom not only from the British but also much more importantly from the economic, political and cultural slavery of the Dalits under the caste Hindus. He wanted the British to ensure that freedom to the Dalits before granting independence to India.

The Christian missionaries and churches sided with Gandhi. They extolled him as a witness to true Christian values and did not pay attention to Ambedkar at all. They became interested in him only when they realised that he was thinking of leaving Hinduism to join another religion. Otherwise, the Dalits' agenda was not part of Christian mission.

**In the post independent period,** Christian Churches saw the necessity of establishing some kind of dialogue with the main Hindu group for the sake of inter-religious harmony and understanding. To this end they probed the philosophical, theological and spiritual depth of Brahmanic Hindu heritage but ignored completely the evil things of Hinduism, such as the caste system and untouchability and did not even think of saying something against these social sins.

Tragically, a total blindness about casteism in Christian Churches as well went on for many years. The first document of the CBCI (Catholic Bishops' Conference of India) against caste mentality and caste discrimination in Christian Churches only appeared in 1982! Other documents followed in 1994 and in 1998.

After independence, Dalit leaders, particularly Baba Shaheb Ambedkar, took up the movement for Dalit liberation addressing all aspects of society: economic, political, and religious. Christian Churches as a whole did not see part of their mission to join the struggle of a broken people. Missionary activities among the Dalits were not encouraged too much, either.

The only one who raised his voice a couple of times to remind Christian Churches about their missionary duties among the down trodden of India was Stephen Fucks. At the end of the 80s this famous missionary and anthropologist invited Christian Churches and missionary agencies to set up a plan for a mass conversion of the 40 million Dalits living in Northern India. According to him these Dalits were open to the teaching of the Gospel and ready to change their religion. They were a vast mission field ready for the harvest but the harvesters were missing or unwilling to do the work.

This is what Stephen Fucks wrote at that time in this regard:

“The Harijans, at least in Northern India, are certainly waiting for the Christian message. Intellectually they are not inferior to the higher castes. From their present state as social and religious outcastes, even ‘untouchables’, the Church could raise them to the standard of valuable members of human society and the Church. The Church was able to reform the decadent people of Greece and Rome: she tamed the fierce barbarians of Northern and Eastern Europe: she is civilising at present times the peoples of Africa and Polynesia... Can she not do the same for the downtrodden and outcaste eighty million Harijans in India? We hear so much of the ‘liberation’ movement in Latin America and in South Africa...and the role the Church has to play in these movements... If any liberation movement is necessary it is here in India and it should be inaugurated for the Harijans. No doubt Gandhi and Ambedkar have already done much for the ‘conscientization’ of the Harijans. But it will require a true Christian spirit to carry the programme of liberation through and to complete it. This is the great task for the Church in India here and now!” (*Vidyajyoti*, September 1977)

Along with making proposals about ways and means to build up a strong Harijan (Dalit) Church, Stephen Fucks also gave practical suggestions for the implementation of his plan of mass conversion of the Dalits of Northern India. Here are some of them:

“There should be a meeting of all the Bishops of the North and they should be persuaded to adopt this plan.

The number of missionaries should be substantially increased. Recruiting of vocations must be organised for this purpose.

The missionaries should be animated and instructed properly through seminars and training courses for intensive conversion work among Harijans.

The missionaries should be well informed about the peculiar culture and mentality of the Harijans, their origin and history, their particular problems and difficulties, their weaknesses and deficiencies, their potential importance for the Church.

Above all the missionaries must learn to take a personal interest in the Harijans: they must love them and sympathise with them.

Seminars should be held to find out the best and most effective methods for conversion work among the Harijans.

Periodic evaluation of the work done and revision of the methods used are necessary in the light of experience gained in the course of time”. ( id. *Vidyajyoti*: September 1977)

Stephen Fucks’ plan was not welcome at all! Not only was it not welcomed but it was bitterly criticised! Other articles appeared in *Vidyajyoti* after that sensational article written by Stephen Fucks and none of them would agree with his plan which was forgotten for almost 20 years.

But Stephen Fucks did not give up his idea, which appeared again in another one of his articles in March 1995 on *Indian Missiological Review*. In that article we read:

“There are already some million Christian Dalits residing in all part of India.... If the leaders of the Catholic Church decide on a vigorous and well-planned evangelisation of Dalits these many communities distributed all over the country could conveniently be used as centres for this apostolic activity. The slums of the big cities of India form certainly a fertile field for a vigorous evangelisation. Slum dwellers are generally untouchables and low castes, perhaps utterly destitute, but for the first time free from the shackles of caste rules and prejudices and the strict orders of Hindu landlords and village elders.... If a social worker or a priest is available he could find an opportunity for evangelisation...It is a method which St. Paul already practised and which seems to be the right one for the slums of the many bid cities now growing up in all parts of India.” (*Indian Missiological Review*, March 1995)

More or less when Stephen Fucks proposed his plan for mass conversion of the Dalits a very interesting book appeared in Bangladesh. The book which has already been quoted in this research is: “*Crucial issues in Bangladesh*” by Peter McNee. In full agreement with Stephen Fucks, even though for sure these two people did not know each other, Peter McNee proposed a massive conversion plan for those groups who in Bangladesh seem to be responsive to the Gospel. Peter McNee was a Protestant Pastor and his book was inspirational for many leaders of Protestant Churches who started tak-

ing great interest towards several groups of Dalits in Bangladesh. The main idea of the book was to use that awful human institution of caste as a vehicle for the Gospel. Here is a direct quote from the book:

‘The future of the Church in Bangladesh lies in multiplying monoethnic Bengali congregations.

By monoethnic I mean mono- caste. Efforts in evangelism should be concentrated in one caste or tribe, whether it be Muslim or Hindu.

These facts are the best and strongest recommendation for serious and concentrated efforts among the Nomusudras and Mochi castes. Both need to be evangelised to their very edges’. (p. 35)

Just as Stephen Fucks’ plan for mass conversion of the Dalits was not well received, also Peter McNee’s dream was not very successful. However, among a good number of Xaverian Missionaries in Bangladesh interested in the problems of the Dalits both Stephen Fucks’ and Peter McNee’s ideas stimulated debate on the various methods of missionary work ‘ad gentes Dalit’.

Some of the questions that group of Missionaries tried to answer were the following:

- Are Stephen Fucks and Peter McNee so sure that the Dalits are a group responsive to the Gospel?
- What kind of help do the Dalits need more: social or religious?
- Which kind of conversion to Christianity should be expected from the Dalits: individual conversion or conversion of the group?
- What about getting responsive groups of Dalits into the Church without baptising them?
- Which kind of services could Christian Churches offer the Dalits?

Debate on these questions is still going on and a final answer is very far away. It seems to be clear enough that the Dalits are not so eager to become disciples of Christ. Even though oppressed and insulted in their human dignity by Hinduism and even though their religiosity differs a lot from the Hindu tradition, the Dalits feel they are Hindus and the majority of them want to remain Hindus. The deep rooted personal attachment of the Dalits to the Hinduised form of their ancestral gods and goddesses coupled with the tricky Government policy of reservation of educational and economic benefits only to Hindu Dalits, make any mass exodus of the Dalits from Hinduism unlikely. Therefore, Christian Churches should drop their hope of increasing their numbers through mass conversion of Dalits.

Under these circumstances what could Christian Churches do for the Dalits? The following points could be a great field for the Christian Churches to get involved in:

1. Continuous self criticism and evaluation of their efforts to fight against the caste mentality present in all the different Christian Churches whose main task should be the real conversion of their members to Christian brotherly communion. Christian Churches should repent and ask for forgiveness of their sins in this regard and put into practice the revolutionary message of the Magnificat.

The last document of the Catholic Church in India in this regard seems to be quite encouraging. This is what we read in that document:



“The Church in India, particularly in recent years, has been very active in denouncing the caste system and discrimination against the Dalits. Further it has taken positive measures for their development. However we have to admit that the situation still remains a serious concern. The prevalence of caste based practices, not only in society but also in some parts of the Church in India even at the close of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is a matter of shame and disgrace to all of us. It is a cause of sorrow and an expression of our inability to live our Christian faith adequately. It is not only a denial of human dignity and equality but also against the fundamental teaching of Christ who was a friend of the outcaste of His time and freely mixed with them. Discrimination against anybody on the basis of caste is a sin against God and humanity. This needs to be proclaimed from the house tops so that the caste based practices will be removed from the Christian community totally as part of our preparation for Yesu Christ Jayanti 2000.” (*Extracts from the CBCI General Body Meeting, 21-28 March 1998*)

In their Action Programme the Indian Bishops’ Conference recommended the following measures to be implemented in the whole Church to eradicate caste discrimination:

- a faith based vision that enables us to see Christ in the Dalits
- top priority to the Dalits in the Church social apostolate
- clear stand against caste and discrimination
- no signs of discrimination in places of worship, cemeteries...
- reservations for the Dalits in Church institutions both in admissions and employment.
- recruitment of Dalit candidates to priesthood and religious life

So far so good! It is hoped that the Catholic Church keeps going on with this Action Programme!

**2.** The second field of action for Christian Churches on behalf of the Dalits could be supporting them in their struggle to be full-fledged members of Hinduism. We have seen that the majority of the Dalits consider themselves Hindus. They want to remain in the main stream of Hinduism in spite of Ambedkar’s statement that the Dalits are not Hindus and his invitation to them to quit this religion which fosters inequality and injustice. To oppose first the Dalits’ conversion to Christianity and then Ambedkar’s revolutionary attempt, the leaders of the Hindu Renaissance started claiming that the Dalits are Hindus. To keep them inside Hinduism the Government gave them political, economic and educational benefits through the policy of positive-reverse-compensatory discrimination. So far full acceptance also on the religious level has not materialised. Religious empowerment of the Dalits who want to remain Hindus has not happened yet. A full integration of the Dalits into Hinduism is still very far away.... Help and support to the Dalits in their protest against religious discrimination and in their claims for an active involvement in religious business of Hinduism could be an authentic form of Christian ministry.

3. A third field of action for Christian Churches among the Dalits could be to promote Dalit solidarity. In their struggle for equality and justice the Dalits have to face also the problem of internal division which is one of the biggest hindrances to their liberation process. Dalits are internally divided in castes and subcastes scattered throughout the vast Indian Subcontinent and are prone to be rendered powerless because of divisive forces. Dalit solidarity presumes and demands that Dalits unite across division of castes and subcastes, religions, regions and languages to establish a community of interests. The Dalit leadership has to strive consistently for bringing about this internal unity without which the Dalits will not have any strength in their struggles. Christian Churches could play a very important role in this regard.

Moreover Christian Churches could be busy with another important aspect of Dalit Solidarity by informing the world about the miserable plight of the Dalits. The international community has recognised the problems of apartheid and racial discrimination but the problems of the Dalits, arising from untouchability and the caste system sanctioned by Hindu religion, has attracted little attention from the international community because it is not visible and because of “religious tolerance.” The discrimination practised against the Dalits of South Asia is another kind of apartheid but the world community knows very little about it. Christian Churches could educate the international community about caste and untouchability and give the Dalits a great help in their quest for human dignity.

4. The last field of action for Christian Churches to help the Dalits is to find out all the possible ways to give them empowerment. Once again, the song of the Virgin Mary, the Magnificat, should be taken very seriously. To empower the Dalits means to give them more power to make decisions by themselves and to improve their own conditions. Power won't reach the hands of the Dalits so easily. There will be a long way to go and these are the paths to be followed to reach that end:

- education understood not only as literacy but also as a tool to become aware of the forces, which keep the Dalits in their social, material and religious slavery.
- economic development and independence which will provide them the basic context to negotiate for equality
- social awareness and political participation
- a new type of efficient leadership
- the famous slogan of Ambedkar: educate, organise, and agitate. Agitation, even if it does not immediately produce the social change desired may help in the conscientization and growth of the persons agitating
- personal growth: freedom from the psychological problems Dalits are affected by....

Empowerment of the Dalits should achieve this triple result:

- self realisation
- self respect
- self reliance

These are the 3Rs of Dalit Liberation! A very long way to go!

What has been said so far can be regarded as some kind of Christian ministry towards the Dalits who will continue to identify themselves with Hinduism.

Mass movements of Dalits willing to move out of Hinduism for embracing Christianity seem to be quite unlikely nowadays. And no charismatic leaders have appeared among them since Ambedkar's times. Nevertheless, there may be some Dalits who might ask to join Christianity. In that case Christian Churches and missionaries should find out the best ways to welcome them and to make decent Christians out of them.

We would offer the following suggestions to the Christian Churches willing to accept Dalit converts:

- young educated people should be preferred to illiterate people. Educated people could have a better understanding of the main tenets of the new religion they are embracing
- rather than Church affiliation and membership Christ discipleship should be stressed
- altogether with Bible study a deep knowledge about all the matters regarding caste and untouchability should be a 'condition sine qua non' for being accepted as a candidate for Baptism
- the new Christians should show their interest for the new religion also 'economically'...
- a missionary attitude and a self-propagating mentality should animate the new convert.

Something should also be said about the Christian missionaries willing to work among the Dalits. It should be enough to say that these missionaries will need infinite patience, an inexhaustible optimism, and great strength of character and heroic charity. Verbal abuses, bitter criticism, deceitful behaviour, sometimes servile and sometimes arrogant attitude and absurd requests and even physical assaults are what a Christian missionary serving the Dalits have to go through everyday.

Moreover the word 'gratefulness' doesn't seem to exist in the heart of the Dalits... To sum up: the only strength for a Christian missionary serving the Dalits seem to be the Cross of Christ.

# CONCLUSION

This study-research on caste and untouchability certainly is not finished! Other chapters should be written and added. Other fields should be explored in this regard.

For example, the field of literature is one area that would be fascinating to further research. There are famous modern Indian writers who have dealt with caste and untouchability in their novels. Moreover Bengali literature has not kept silent about these social evils of the Indian Subcontinent. It would be very interesting to know what Rabindranath Tagore, Nazrul Islam, Shorot Chondro, Michael Modhu Shudon Dotto and Shukanto, etc., have said, on this subject.

The world of movies is another subtopic yet to be explored. Film producers of West Bengal made two beautiful pictures on caste and untouchability: 'Sati' and 'Antarjoli Jatra'. Such short movies such as 'Thakurka Khua' and 'Satgati' give a very graphic idea about what untouchability is like. Undoubtedly, within India there must be other movies, which deal on this subject.

Studies on how caste and untouchability are dealt with in the world of literature, films, and other arts would be very useful and very important for this research.

At the same time, concerned people who would like to keep up to date about the struggle against these two social evils should become subscribers of two important magazines which deal with the issues of caste and untouchability: '*Dalit Voice*' and '*Dalit International News Letter*'. '*Dalit voice*' is published in India and Dr. John C. B. Webster, a renowned scholar on the two issues of caste and untouchability, publishes '*Dalit International News Letter*' in the U.S.A.

The following is a conclusive note to this study – research on caste and untouchability.

1. These two social evils are very far away from being dead. They are still very much strong and alive among people living in the Indian Subcontinent, whatever religious affiliation they may belong to.
2. The problem of Untouchability has not been resolved by its constitutional abolition or by recent changes in Indian society such as legislation against it or Reversed-Compensatory discrimination towards the Untouchables. Its ghost will continue to haunt the Indian Subcontinent for many years to come. Great political figures of the stature of Gandhi, Nehru and Ambedkar, capable of awakening the conscience of people, are not visible in the Indian Subcontinent at the moment. Rather we see the active and strong forces of Hindu fundamentalism, which has preservation of caste and untouchability as one of the main points of its political agenda.
3. The monster of caste and untouchability has five strong heads: political, religious, economic, social and cultural.... A serious attempt to kill the monster should aim at cutting off all the 5 heads.... This attempt has never been

done in the past history of the Indian Subcontinent and it is unlikely that it will be done in the future. That is one reason why the monster will continue to live.

4. A way to weaken the continual debasement of much of the subcontinent population would be to raise a high degree of international consciousness through which pressure would be put on the Governments of the nations of the Indian Subcontinent. In this regard an international network of NGOs is trying to raise consciousness about Dalit human rights in international forums. During the last conference against racism in South Africa the issues of caste and untouchability were raised and paragraph 85 of the final Declaration of the WCAR (World Conference against Racism) recognised the practice of untouchability as a means of stigmatising the 260 million Dalits of South Asia. Paragraph 86 has declared caste practices of distinction to be 'hidden apartheid' which denies Dalits their economic, social, political, cultural and religious rights.

5. We as Christians and Missionaries should be extremely careful not to strengthen the caste system through our activities. Very often, we start activities, which are meant for out caste people but in the end they benefit high caste people.

6. As Christian Missionaries sent by the Lord to preach the good news of the Gospel in this Indian Subcontinent we should help those Christian people whose eyes are caste blind to open them and make them understand that unchristian things in Christian Churches should not be tolerated.

7. At the same time we should try to help people interested in human welfare understand that these two social evils are a stumbling block for real human development. If we want a society based on freedom, equality, and justice the 'homo hierarchicus' must be replaced by the 'homo aequalis'.

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